

Kazi Nazrul Islam – A Biography

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Declaration


I , Soumi Roy, hereby declare that the thesis entitled 'Kazi Nazrul Islam – A Biography' submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** is the result of original research and has not been previously submitted for any degree to this or any other university.




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Certificate

We recommend that this thesis may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.




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ABBREVIATIONS

1. **NRS:** Nazrul Rachona Samagra (Collected Works of Nazrul Islam), Vol.1-7, Kolkata, West Bengal, Bangla Academy.
2. **WBSA:** West Bengal State Archives.
3. **GOI:** Government of India.
4. **EPW:** Economic and Political Weekly.
5. **IESHR:** Indian Economic and Social History Review.
6. **OUP:** Oxford University Press.
7. **CUP:** Cambridge University Press.

Chapter – 1

Introduction

“What is a rebel? A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion”, said Albert Camus. “A rebel is one who is angry but not resentful; one who does not suffer from a feeling of personal deprivation. Resentment breeds envy – envy for something he thinks others possess and he lacks. Envy and resentment are not the emotions of a rebel; pain and suffering are. A rebel has the ability to identify with ‘others’, he is moved by their suffering and suffers for them. He swims across the rivers of tears and magnifies his cross. But he is not bitter because he is not selfish; he is not motivated by a feeling of personal deprivation”¹.

- Apoorvanand Jha.

In the Eastern parts of India, Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) is popularly called the ‘Bidrohi Kobi’ (‘rebel’ poet). Among other issues or aspects, this study attempts to understand just what constituted this ‘rebellion’. More generally, I try to focus on the life and work of Nazrul Islam, who has been largely left out from the realm of historical studies, especially outside Bengal. I shall make an attempt to understand Nazrul’s socio-political and religious ideology. My endeavour will be to historicize his life and work, situating it within the larger social and political and literary context of twentieth century Bengal. A critical study of Nazrul becomes important because of the multiple identities that he displays. For example, one may critically analyse his identity as a nationalist and that of a devout Muslim who worried about the fate of Islam or developments in Islamic countries.

Nazrul, is among the greatest contributors to the cultural heritage of modern Bengal and was crowned as Bangladesh’s National Poet. All of his contribution and his accomplishments came about within a brief period of time. Out of the seventy-seven years that he lived, Nazrul had a creative period of less than twenty-four years (1919-1943). His literary and social life was cut short by a mysterious neurological disease which seriously affected the functions of his body. Tragically, even the brief period of his creative life was struck with financial losses, personal tragedies and continuous inspection by the colonial government, which put him behind the bars on charges of

¹ Apoorvanand Jha, “Umar Khalid, my Son”, *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, 23 February 2016.

sedition and proscribed a number of his works. Astonishingly, Nazrul produced during this period, “at least 25 books of poetry, 3500 songs and *ghazals*, 3 books of stories, 3 novels, 3 books of translated works, 29 plays, 2 film scripts, and 5 books comprising essays” and other writings. This impressive contribution excludes writings that still lie scattered in obscure and now extinct periodicals and in little known private collections.

In my understanding, there are some markers of Nazrul’s rebellion, the values that essentially constituted his ‘rebellion’, and the compelling elements of his writings that made him look like a ‘rebel’. Some of these are identified as under:

- Humanitarianism – Nazrul fervently voiced his demand for improving the human condition. This underscored the importance of being caring, kind, gentle, and compassionate towards people of all communities.
- Egalitarianism – Nazrul Islam’s vision of an egalitarian society led him to oppose gross social and economic inequalities. Many believe that Nazrul’s ideology distinctly leaned towards the Left. However, there is reason to believe that he did not have a doctrinaire understanding of Left ideology. It might be more justly said that his belief in egalitarianism was ill defined but passionate.
- Liberation – Freedom from the shackles of the colonial rule was his foremost preoccupation. Between 1919-1930, Nazrul wrote extensively against the British government and their supporters in this country. Anti-imperialism was thus an important part of his ‘rebellion’.
- Communal Harmony – Unity between the two major religious communities (Hindu and Muslim) in India was what Nazrul constantly advocated. According to him, if both Hindus and Muslims came together then the nation would be a better place to live. However, Nazrul believed that merely speaking of human unity did not ipso-facto lead to political liberation. In other words, man had to be liberated from culturally and synthetically constructed walls of gender, class, race, religion, ethnicity, and nationality.

- Justice – against caste oppression and other forms of socio-economic exploitation². Be it colonial rule or the tyranny of the zamindars, Nazrul’s ire was directed against all of them. One of his most compelling moves was the attempted arousal of a moral sense against injustice.

These markers shall be established with references to his writings in the course of this work. However, it is also my considered opinion, that over-emphasizing the note of rebelliousness in his writings would be a lopsided view of his work. Surely, Nazrul’s love lyrics and his poems on nature do not show the ‘rebel’ side of his character. Rather, in these poems, Nazrul reveals himself as melancholic and a calmer. Nazrul’s attempt in writing children’s literature calls for a different tag to his name too.

The University of Calcutta in 1945, honoured Nazrul with the highest award in Bengali literature - the “*Jagattarini Gold Medal*”. He was also the recipient of the “*Padma Bhushan*” award (1960), one of the highest honours given to any civilian. The Bangladesh Government bestowed him with the honour of naming him as the “National Poet” of Bangladesh and he was awarded the “*Ekushe Padak*” in 1976. The University of Dhaka in 1975, crowned him with the Honorary D.Litt. Many institutions and skill development centres in India as well as in Bangladesh have been formed and founded in his memory.

- ***How Differently I Look at the Subject***

A study of Nazrul only as a literary figure seems insufficient and inadequate. An attempt in this study will be made to place Nazrul in the social, political and intellectual history of 20th century Bengal. This study is an attempt at understanding what constituted this ‘rebellion’. Is it appropriate to tag Nazrul with an epithet of a ‘rebel’? His roots in the past, contribution in the contemporary world, impact over the future, as well as broad contextual concerns mark the presence of Nazrul Islam as truly historic; an indispensable character in the history of modern India, particularly in

² Nazrul never hesitated to comment on the tradition, culture and ritual of other religious communities. He never stopped to think if the Hindus would actually listen to him or not. For him, it was necessary to point out the ills prevailing in the society, so he did. This attitude could have been derived from his personal experiences also. We shall discuss this issue in the second chapter.

20th century Bengal. His absence in historical works on the period is a void that the present study has sought to overcome.

The study is not only focused on expansively examining the textual, literary content of the texts themselves, but also in understanding the political and cultural positioning of these over time. In the process I hope to appreciate the changes in themes (content) of these genres in historical perspective.

Through reading the ideology of Nazrul Islam an attempt will be made to raise some questions which will problematise the way the work of Nazrul has been read till now. Some of the questions are raised below –

- ◆ Nazrul is popularly called the ‘rebel’ poet. Why was he called so? Was he always the ‘first’ in whatever he did in the literary world of 20th century of Bengal? Did he never have a precedent/predecessor having done the same things? Nazrul, certainly, needs to be studied more critically.
- ◆ Was his choice of the language an expression of ‘rebellion’? If Nazrul’s poetry and songs are idioms of ‘rebellion’ within the history of Bengali literature then is the inspiration purely political or partly also literary? Did Nazrul actually challenge the hegemony of Tagore? Or was he drawn into the controversy by others? How else do we explain the emerging conflict between the two groups ‘Shonibarar Chithi’ and ‘Kallol’³?
- ◆ In his songs on Hindu gods and goddesses can we read an element of ‘theological rebelliousness’ in Nazrul? How else does he write Shyama Sangit? Does he put forward his own opinion on Hindu religion in these songs? He is often seen as the person who revolutionized the genre of Islamic songs. How did he ‘revolutionize’ the genre?
- ◆ How can we use culture, especially performative genres such as poetry and music to gain a better understanding of socio - political relations?

³ **Kallol** – a literary movement started around 1923 to 1935. The word Kallol means “the sound of waves”. The Kallol group had literary magazine by the same name. A few prominent group members were Buddhadeb Basu, Premendra Mitra and Kazi Nazrul Islam.

There are a certain number of preconceived notions surrounding the lesser popularity of Nazrul as compared to Rabindranath Tagore; though the volume Nazrul's literary contribution surpassed Tagore's.

(i) Some say that the use of Persian words and phrases in Nazrul's work was one of its reasons. As the middle class of West Bengal had distanced itself from its Islamic past, it was only pretty obvious that Nazrul Geeti would be pushed to the sidelines. This could be easily said by taking a look at the Nazrul songs which remain in circulation within the domain of the popular. These hardly include *any* of Nazrul's Islamic songs (such as 'Hey Modina-bashi' or 'Kabar Jiya Raatey'). However, some of Nazrul's *Shyama Sangeet*⁴ still circulates. Nazrul had a different rendition of the song. Though, the listeners these days can barely distinguish which is Pannalal's and which is Nazrul's? Pannalal's rendition of Nazrul's *Sakoli Tomar Ichha*⁵ is all that mostly people remember.

(ii) Another popular notion is that the Bengali middle class moved away from the 'High Classical' music of Nazrul Islam. Rabindra Sangeet, by contrast, was well appropriated and incorporated into many Bengali cinematic venture. Nazrul Geeti is usually seen as more rustic and old fashioned. Whereas Tagore's light music is seen as the epitome of modernity.

(iii) The third popular notion believes that since Tagore institutionalized and copyrighted himself it was easier for people to access his work and research upon him. Whereas Nazrul wrote 'on demand' and served for a long time as musical trainer at HMV, he mostly penned songs which were performed by various artists and then often forgotten. In the absence of any institution to canonize his songs, it became more and more difficult to access him and authenticate his tunes (there are various versions of each song which vary in their words, styles and even tunes).

These above mentioned myths about Nazrul are worth reflecting upon but I am uncomfortable with these easy and more or less mechanical explanations. We need to

⁴ *Shyama Sangeet* - These are songs sung in praise of goddess Kali.

⁵ *Sakoli Tomar Ichha* recorded by Pannalal Bhattacharyya in 'Bhaktigi', (HMV SPHO 23033), 1983 and in 'Kaji Najruler Abismaraniya Shyama Sangeet' (HMV TPHV 28030), 1988.

tease out the question of the circumstances under which these myths gets consolidated. To say that Rabindra Sangeet fits in the idea of the modern and Nazrul is somehow consigned to 'high-classical' and rustic is not entirely convincing. We need to question how these notions of 'modern' and 'rustic' gets associated with these cultural/literary icons. Rabindra Sangeet at its best can be very complex as well (both in terms of raga usage and taal) and Nazrulgeeti also has simpler compositions like *Momer putul*, *Rum jhum jhum jhum* etc. The most popular songs from both genres are of course the simpler songs that are easily repackaged and sold. We ought to keep in mind that there is a 'political border' which might have a major role to play. We also need to understand the cultural politics connected with language and religion that differentiates between Rabindra Sangeet and Nazrul Geeti.

I think the larger issue remains - a change in mass taste connected with linguistic and religious identity. Thus it is not about musical style per se so much as how musical styles became located within the larger shaping of language and culture along hegemonic religious & ethnic lines. I would like to state that musical genres are sometimes hard to pin down as simple/complex, and that their popularity depends on several other factors apart from their supposed accessibility. Tagore songs may sound 'simpler' to us as we are so used to them. All of this shall be discussed in chapter five where the two images of Nazrul – that of being the 'people's poet' and a 'national poet' will be discussed.

Nazrul and his ideology as well as his cultural outpouring is a vast topic of enquiry, covering his poems, essays, novels and short stories, which needs an in depth study. I have tried to review the writings of the poet which reflected the socio-political reality and gave insight into his vision of an ideal society. This proposed research is primarily interdisciplinary in character, as any cultural study is, to arrive at answers within a broadly historical perspective.

Notwithstanding his accomplishments and his fascinating qualities as a historical subject, Nazrul has been left out from the mainstream literary studies on intellectual history of the 20th century Bengal. Works on Nazrul by Bengali scholars have been much detailed and extensive biographies but not as a part of historical studies. On the other hand, works on Nazrul in English language have been carved out of inadequate sources, thus providing the reader with only partial information about his life and

work and yet again not critically. Much of Nazrul's work remains in Bengali, which makes it difficult for the scholars to work in any other language. A brief survey of the existing historiography on Nazrul is attempted below.

An example of Nazrul's absence in literary studies can be seen in '*Bengali Muslim Literati & the Development of Muslim Community in Bengal*', A.K. Chakraborty (IAS, Simla, 2002). The book only marginally mentions Nazrul and his writings during the period. The book covers a time period from 1847 to 1932. It discusses writers from Mir Mosharraf Hossain to Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Kazi Nazrul Islam who was by far the most well-known and popular among the Muslims of Kolkata at the period between 1918-1935 finds only minimum reference in the book. Similarly, N.Gerald Barrier's, "*Banned: Controversial Literature and Political Control in British India, 1907-1947*", (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), does not even mention about the proscription of Nazrul Islam's numerous writings that took place from the 1920s and remained in full flare till the 1940s (examples have been given in the next section on Nazrul's life and work).

Some of the biographies of Nazrul are also just a straight narrative of his life and work. For example, Serajul Islam Choudhury's, '*Nazrul Islam: Poet and More*' (1994) and also '*Introducing Nazrul Islam*' (1974) attempt an understanding broadly the 'Nazrul' character and his work. These works do not clearly emphasize his political participation nor place Nazrul in the contemporary historical milieu. These are just general attempts to introduce the readers to different aspects of Nazrul Islam's genius and assess his contribution to the literature and culture of Bengal.

In the same league of writings falls the book by Basudha Chakravarty, '*Kazi Nazrul Islam*' (1968) which on one hand is an absolutely brilliant narrative of his work and its importance and contribution to Bengali literature but falls short of taking into consideration the aspect of dissent in his writings which in turn contributes much to the intellectual history of the time. Thus it can be said that most of the writings on Nazrul do not focus on the historical importance of his ideas, ideologies, creativity and innovation. Mustafa Nurul Islam's "*Bengali Muslim Public Opinion as Reflected in the Bengali Press*" (1973) also just briefly touches upon Nazrul and his views as reflected in the Bengali press. Similarly, David M. Laushey in "*Bengal Terrorism and the Marxist Left: Aspects of Regional Nationalism in India, 1905-1942*" (1975)

mentions Nazrul Islam only once as a reader of and a writer on the Russian Revolution and Marxism. Leonard A. Gordon has also only made some casual references to Nazrul and his work in *'Bengal: The Nationalist Movement, 1876-1940'*.

All the above mentioned books lack a critical assessment of Nazrul. A focus on Nazrul as a Nationalist and a Bengali Muslim figure has not been done so far with the exception of Priti Kumar Mitra's work, *'The Dissent of Nazrul Islam: Poetry and History'*, (2007). The work focuses primarily on Nazrul's dissent against the British colonial government in India. It is a survey of the literary and cultural circumstances that shaped Nazrul's ideas and actions and his exchanges with his space, time, and environs. Priti Kumar Mitra's work is one of the first attempts to locate Nazrul in the sphere of intellectual history of South Asia; though the work focuses only on the 'dissent' side of Nazrul. It provides a limited understanding of Nazrul's character.

The list of Bengali books on Nazrul is impressive enough, though they too lack a critical assessment. Several biographies of Nazrul exist in West Bengal as well as in Bangladesh. Of these Muzaffar Ahmed⁶'s *"Kazi Nazrul Islam: Smritikatha"* (a personal Memoir by the prominent Communist leader from Bengal at that time), Rafiqul Islam's *'Kazi Nazrul Islam: Jeevan O Sahitya'*, and Arun Kumar Basu's *'Nazrul Jivani'*, are the most reliable. Arun Kumar Basu's, *Nazrul Jivani*, work is an excellent contribution in the sphere of Nazrul studies.

Basu alleges that most pieces of work by Nazrul have been deliberately erased by the All India Radio for reasons still unknown. Both Arun Kumar Basu and Rafiqul Islam have highlighted how eventually, the lifeless body of Kazi Nazrul Islam, became a matter of contestation between the two sovereign nations, India and Bangladesh. The dispute over claiming Nazrul and his legacy also took place at a crucial socio-political juncture for Bangladesh. All the three works in Bangla on Nazrul do acknowledge the unique contribution of Nazrul to the realm of ideas and in creating a stir in intellectual history of Bengal in that period. An all-time friend and supporter of Nazrul, Comrade Muzaffar Ahmed, who worked together with him on many occasions, sheds additional

⁶ Muzaffar Ahmed was one of the founders of the communist movement in India. Born in a middle class Muslim family in Sandip (now in Bangla Desh) on August 5, 1889. Edited daily *Nabajug* in 1920 with Kazi Nazrul Islam

light on Nazrul's political and social ideologies, to situations which compelled Nazrul to take decision regarding his personal life.

Prof. Rafiqul Islam is one of the foremost authorities on Kazi Nazrul Islam in Bangladesh. In his book *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Jivan O Sahitya*, he has included a discussion of the poet's novels, stories, essays and plays besides poetry. Prof. Islam regrets the lack of interest in Nazrul. He also regrets that Nazrul was politicized, "Another tragedy is that we have declared Nazrul our national poet", he argues, "We have thus made him a poet of the government, a poet of a political party, a poet of bureaucrats. Nazrul always fought against the establishment, but now he has been made a poet of the establishment, which is very unfortunate"⁷. Although such scholars have brought out many interesting dimensions to Nazrul's life and work, these have been available only to Bengali knowing readers and scholars.

The Bengali Muslim Community in 19th century – A Brief Survey

The colonisation of India started with Bengal and quite naturally, Bengali society was the first to feel the impact of the West and undergo changes which later spread to other parts of India. These developments which were especially manifest during the period of the early decades of the 19th century were possible because of the rising tide of new ideologies which were starting to come into sight as a consequence of Colonial rule in India. Initially, the government followed the policy of non-interference, of allowing things to take their own course as long as they did not adversely affect English commercial and political interests. Englishmen and Indians, however, could not remain in two watertight compartments. Intercourse, commercial, social and administrative, brought the people of the two continents together in a closer relationship.

Western ideologies and institutional practices were slowly influencing Indian ideas and institutions. The amalgamation of the new Western ideas with the traditional features of the Bengali society in the 19th century generated ideas which helped to shape different trends in the political thought amongst the educated urban Hindu and Muslim

⁷ Rafiqul Islam, "Re- evaluation of Nazrul: Need of the hour", *The Daily Star*, Dhaka, November 14, 2010.

communities of Bengal. The Hindus adjusted themselves more easily to the new situation and adopted Western education. The replacement of Persian by English was better received by the Hindus. Hindus took up English in place of Persian and participated in commercial ventures with the British⁸. The Permanent settlement established the Hindu landowning classes in position of considerable wealth and power but Hindus also comprised the bulk of the new intelligentsia.

One aspect of transformation of Bengal society was social mobility particularly among certain sections of the people, despite the inhibitive influence of caste, religious customs and traditions. The mobility was facilitated by the peculiar nature of the British rule. Development in contemporary England, particularly the movement of the free-traders, had a great impact upon the social and economic development of Bengal⁹. The attempts of the free-traders to enlist the sympathy and support of the Indian merchants in their struggle against the monopoly of the East India Company, promoted remarkable commercial activity which facilitated the growth of the Indian business community¹⁰. Commercial activities in Bengal had increased enormously with the steady inflow of European merchants, particularly after the East India Company's monopoly of the India trade was broken by the Act of 1813. Along with the English free-traders, the Indian mercantile group also pressed for to the ending of the East India Company's monopoly.

However, an important point to keep in mind is that it was only under the Governor-Generalship of Lord Hastings that the censorship over the press was abolished (under the act of 1818). The abolition gave a great impetus to the growth of the press in India. A number of new newspapers not only in English but in the vernacular languages now began to be published. These papers fully reflected the dominant ideas of the age.

⁸ Azizur Rahman Mallick, *British Policy and the Muslims in Bengal 1757-1856*, Asiatic Society of Pakistan, Dhaka, 1961, p.31.

⁹ A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed, *Social Ideas & Social Change in Bengal: 1818-1835*, Rddhi.India, Kolkata, 1976, pp.8-9.

¹⁰ Ibid.

For the Hindus, the establishment of the British power in India meant a profound change in the educational system bringing a new language and new ideas. The Hindus accepted the consequences of that change. But the Muslims, especially those of north India, with their pride as the former rulers of the country were slow in adapting themselves to changing circumstances. The transference of power from Muslim to British hands produced widespread dejection among the former ruling class¹¹. And for many decades the Muhammadans failed to take advantage of the new education planted by the conqueror¹². The Hindus in fitting themselves for service under the new masters merely learnt one foreign language, English, instead of another, Persian: their religion, culture was not necessarily affected. For Muslims the abandonment of Arabic studies – with its religious importance – and of Persian, the language of polity society and the language of administrative need, meant the abandonment of essential elements¹³.

The Muslims of Bengal, wrote the veteran Christian missionary, Rev. J. Long in 1869, ‘have degenerated, and will sink to a still lower depth unless steps are taken to remedy what must be an evil attended with serious consequences’¹⁴. He called upon the British not to ignore the community and warned that ‘Muhammedanism is not dead, but sleeping’. Islam in India, and more particularly in Bengal, was indeed in the midst of turmoil in the 19th century. The tensions it felt and the expectations it raised not only posed a threat to the British colonial administration but caused a major crisis in the life of the Muslim masses, which ultimately created conditions favourable to the growth of a distinct ideology¹⁵.

The social composition of the Muslim population in Bengal differed significantly from Muslims in other parts of the country. Nearly all of them in Bengal were descended from indigenous converts, while ‘the descendants of the conquerors...count perhaps in

¹¹ J.N Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India*, Kessinger Publishing, New York, 2003, p. 91.

¹² Sufia Ahmed, *Muslim Community in Bengal 1884-1912*, OUP, Dhaka, 1974, p. 8.

¹³ Ibid. More true of upper class Muslim of North India not Bengali Muslims.

¹⁴ Rev. Long in, ‘The Social Condition of the Muhammadans of Bengal and the Remedies’, 1869.

¹⁵ Muslims were in greater danger than Islam itself. The ‘danger’ to Islam was essentially an orthodox worry, for the common Muslim artisan/peasant; these were non-questions.

their hundreds'.¹⁶ At the time of the Muslim conquest of Bengal, those Bengali peasants and artisans who were to embrace Islam were already in an inferior social position. The Hindu element of the population, therefore, by its constitution, represented a higher social stratum, the Muslim element a lower one¹⁷.

On the other hand, for the old Muslim aristocracy, the conquests of Clive and the settlements of Cornwallis meant the loss of privileges. The British discouraged Muslim soldiery and disbanded the native army comprising mostly by the Muslims¹⁸. The Bengali Muslims underwent great social and political changes in the early part of the British rule. Being deprived of their former privileges the Muslim elite (ashraf) could hardly adjust themselves to British rule.

The Muslims remained attached to their time-honoured customs and manners. By sweeping away the old structure of administration, Cornwallis and his successors had edged Muslims out of the revenue-collecting system. For a time, Muslims continued to hold their own in the judicial service and the law, so long as Persian and Urdu, around which their traditional education had been built, continued to be the language of the British administration in Bengal. But when English was needed in the public services and high courts, they began to be squeezed out. A need for public servants with knowledge of English language created new attitudes of the British administration towards its educational policies¹⁹. The new needs found expression in the discussion which led up to the decision, in 1835, that Western knowledge should be imparted rather than Oriental, and in English rather than in Oriental languages²⁰. This decision on the part of the British rulers of India had entirely different effects on the two communities in India – the Hindus and the Muslims.

¹⁶ Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later 19th century*, CUP, Cambridge, 1968, pp. 300-301.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Pradip Kumar Lahiri, *Bengali Muslim Thought (1818-1947)*, K.P. Bagchi & Comp., Kolkata, 1991, p.2.

¹⁹ A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed, *Social Ideas & Social Change in Bengal: 1818-1835*, Riddhi, Kolkata, 1976 and Sufia Ahmed, *Muslim Community in Bengal 1884-1912*, OUP, Dhaka, 1974

²⁰ Ibid

Prior to English rule, through centuries of experience of living side by side, Hindus and Muslims had grown around each other's differences and had come to terms with it to build a stable relationship. It is true that the caste system prevented Hindus from entering into close social relationships e.g. inter-dining and inter-marriage, and Hindus in general would not have such relationship with Muslims; but this did not necessarily mean any disrespect or hatred- both sides understood each other's preferences and prejudices²¹. Social differences between the two communities sharpened, however, began to grow after 1835, when English became the administrative language of business replacing Persian. This marked the beginning of a disaster according to the Muslims, and it indeed became one for them. Their inability to turn the sails in the direction of the changing winds not only brought a sharp deterioration in their position from which they took a long time to recover; it also widened the gulf between the two communities.

Adding fuel to the fire, Hindu perceptions about the medieval period with some Muslim Rulers also gradually changed in the course of the 19th century. This change in perception was evident through the writings of the Bengali Hindu writers of the period. e.g. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94), like many of his contemporaries, thought of the long period when Muslim dynasties ruled over India as a period of oppressive alien rule²². For Bengal, Mughal rule was described as a time when Bengal was turned into a dependent economy because the region's resources were drained away and there was nothing to show for it even in the form of monuments constructions²³. Bankim's overall assessment of this long period of Indian history is determinedly negative. The following sentence clearly shows his opinion on the Muslim rule: 'The iron heel of the Musalman tyrant had set its mark on the shoulders of the nation'²⁴. The slogans that Bankim coined in his Hindu re-generative literature

²¹ A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed, *Social Ideas & Social Change in Bengal: 1818-1835*, Rddhi.India, Kolkata, 1976, p. 19.

²² Rammohun Roy said the same well before Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. This was a result of reading Mill's 'History of British India'.

²³ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth-Century Bengal*, OUP, USA, 2002, pp.187-188.

²⁴ Ibid.

were soon adopted by rebellious Hindu nationalists. The *Bande Mataram* was sung as a war-cry to rouse Hindu mobs against Muslims in his novel *Anandamath*.

In 1837 the use of Persian as the language of both upper and lower Courts was ended and its place was taken by English and the vernaculars. This change of official language was beneficial for the Hindus, who by this time had already adopted the new English language. The Muslims, on the other hand, did not have any institution other than the Calcutta Madrassa (established in 1781), where they could learn English. And even in this institution, English classes were not opened until 1829. At the same time they neglected the study of Bengali, which they regarded as the 'language of idolatry'²⁵. It was also noted that before a Muslim child went to the school, he or she had to undergo the mosque teaching. So a Muslim child entered school much later than a Hindu child born at the same time. Secondly, the Muslim child usually left school earlier than the Hindu child because his parents often could not pay for him to complete his education. The Muslim parent was usually poorer than his Hindu counterpart, in this part of the country. And thirdly, the Muslim parent gave priority to the Madrassa teaching over the modern English teaching²⁶.

It has been pointed out that the indigenous elementary schools amongst Musalmans were for the most part private places to which a few select pupils were admitted and the teachers either in independent circumstances or in the employment of Government gave their instructions gratuitously²⁷. Admission was often refused and was always obtained with difficulty, and the instruction given to the favored candidates was very imperfect and desultory. At Pandua, a place in the Burdwan district, it was a custom for the Muslim landowners to employ the services of teachers at their own cost to help the children in their neighbourhood who could not afford the education. It was very uncommon to find a wealthy farmer or villager who didn't employ a teacher²⁸. That

²⁵ W.W. Hunter, *The Indian Mussalmans*, 1871. (Premier Book House, Lahore, Reprint, 1964), p.176

²⁶ Sufia Ahmed, op.cit. p. 21.

²⁷ William Adam, 'Reports on the State of Education in Bengal (1835-1838): Including Some Account of the State of Education in Bihar and a Consideration of the Means Adapted to the Improvement and Extension of Public Instruction in both Provinces', University of Calcutta, 1941.

²⁸ Ibid.

class, however, is alleged to have dwindled away and scarcely any such schools continued to exist.

However, the special difficulties and obstacles which stood in the way of the education and social progress of the Muslim became the subject of frequent discussion by the Government; no definite action was taken to promote Muslim education in Bengal until the year 1871. In 1871, a Resolution was passed to meet the demands for Muslim education and also an attempt was made to impart modern secular education amongst the Muslims which would fit them for competition in public life. By this time, the community had also become aware of the extent to which educational backwardness was affecting their political, social and economic status. Accordingly on the 6th of February 1882, the National Muhammadan Association of Calcutta sent a memorial to Lord Ripon, setting forth in general terms, for the first time, the grievances and needs of India's Muslims and more particularly of Bengali Muslims.

As mentioned above, the Muslims in Bengal differed significantly from the Muslims in the other parts of India. To categorize the Muslims all over India as a homogenous entity, distinct from another supposedly homogenous ethnic group, the Hindus, is of course grossly incorrect. The classification of the two as the exploiter and the exploited, the fixing of labels depending on the favoured prejudices of the writer, is equally incorrect. Such categorizations have served as good political slogans but are of little relevance to the realities of the past or the present. Muslims were the exploiters in one region, while in another they were the exploited; and, of course, often in the same locality both communities had their fair shares of the exploiters and the exploited.

The upper section among the Bengali Muslims lived far away from their co-religionists of North India but followed their customs and manners. The lower section in the Muslim society in Bengal adhered to the rites and customs of the Hindus. While on one hand the prevailing culture of the upper class Muslims was built around the Mughal heritage keeping Urdu at its centre, the lower class Muslims were found to be rather more involved with the local Bengali culture. The former considered "kurta" and "pajama" to be the attire for a degnified Muslim, the latter had only a "lungi", if not a "dhoti" akin to their Hindu neighbours; one believed for Urdu to be the real and only

medium of communication for a Muslim, the other was hardly familiar of any word of it²⁹.

There were divergent social, cultural and linguistic traditions of the Muslims living in the different regions of the subcontinent. Though the communities followed the same faith, The Muslims of Uttar Pradesh were in contrast with their counterparts in Bengal. In upper India the Muslims were in a strikingly different position. The North-western Provinces and Awadh had been a centre of Muslim power. Here the community was a minority of some 13 per cent, but as a whole it was more influential, more prosperous and better educated than their co-religionists in eastern India. A far larger proportion of the community lived in towns, and of the rural Muslims many were landlords, whereas in Bengal the typical Muslim was a poor peasant³⁰. The overhaul of the administration in upper India had been much less drastic than in Bengal. Urdu, the medium of Muslim education, remained the language of administration. Consequently, the Muslims retained their important place in the public services. In 1850 they still filled three-quarters of the judicial posts held by Indians in the North-western Provinces. Muslims in the 1880s continued to hold more than 45 per cent of all the uncovenanted executive and judicial posts in the provinces.

But the condition of the Muslims in Bengal was deteriorating, the Muslims constituted only 6 per cent of the total government appointments in Bengal in the year 1867 as opposed to 44 per cent of the Hindus³¹. The percentage further fell to 5 per cent in 1887 as opposed to 60 per cent of the Hindus³². From the above discussion we can see how the Muslim population of Bengal remained backward as compared to their counterparts in Northern India and the Hindus and failed to build a platform for their own representation till the mid 19th century.

²⁹ Pradip Kumar Lahiri, *Bengali Muslim Thought: 1818-1947*, K.P.Bagchi & Comp., Kolkata, 1991 and Anil Seal, op.cit.

³⁰ Anil Seal, op.cit., p. 303.

³¹ Ibid., p. 362, table-57.

³² Ibid.

Muslim consciousness underwent a change during the 19th century revivalist movement of the Muslims, particularly in Bengal. The movement initiated profound changes in the religious ideology and social mores amongst the Bengali Muslims. These changes, crucial to the emergence of a new sense of identity, were largely induced by a series of religious reform movements. The Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya and the Faraizi were the two earliest and most prominent among these. These were rural, peasant based movements. The Tariqah movement was called the Indian Wahhabism, was considered to be an annexe of the “Jihad movement” started by Syed Ahmad Bareilvi (1786-1831). Unlike the Tariqah movement, the Faraizis did not come out openly in support of the Jihad. However, both the movements openly protested against the British rule. The Faraizi movement was typically an indigenous movement and was inseparably connected with the socio-economic life of the rural Muslims. The socio-economic programmes of the reform movements were so designed as to draw support principally from the poorer sections of the community. In a sense, the Faraizi movement was more directly concerned with the aspirations of the poor and the oppressed, though it also had an anti-Hindu angle.

From a historical point of view, these reformatory movements were a byproduct of the fall of the Muslim Empire in India, and these movements were the repercussion of the ulema to the disappearance of their real Islamic world. Which they longed to recuperate by a rolling back to the archaic purity of Islam³³. Their aspiration to purify the reverence to “Allah” was thus to a certain extent the materialization of their confidence that religious development would bring the grandeur of Islam back. They ascribed the political, social and economic adversity that had overtaken the Muslims to their religious ‘degeneration’³⁴, and started on with a programme to regenerate the spirituality, along with their efforts to guard the faith of Islam against the non-believers³⁵. The reform movements achieved great fame not so much for their success in enlisting the active support of the common people, but primarily because they

³³ Rafiuddin Ahmad, *The Bengal Muslims (1871-1906): A Quest for Identity*, OUP, New Delhi 1981, p.41.

³⁴ A term used by Rev. Long in, ‘The Social Condition of the Muhammadans of Bengal and the Remedies’, 1869.

³⁵Rafiuddin Ahmad, *op.cit.*, p.41.

awakened in the oppressed peasantry a consciousness of social injustice and economic oppression, and thus threatened the status quo in the rural society. Their aim was to rid Islam of all that they considered false accretion, including much that was revered by the orthodox.

The late 19th century witnessed the introduction of a new phase of Islamization of Bengal. The new movements –revivalist reform movement and revivalist, combined with the changed social and political circumstances of Bengal under the British domination, sharpened the focus, as never before, on the “Islamic” identity of the Bengali believers, with the result that a massive and organized assault on the syncretistic (we shall also see how the syncretistic tradition was dominant even in the field of literature) tradition and on the cultural values and norms, necessary to sustain it, followed. Until the revivalist challenge, the syncretistic tradition performed a significant historical function in the dissemination of Islam in Bengal, and was not, therefore, an antithesis of Islamization but a necessary stage in its historical development in Bengal³⁶. As has been seen in the popular 19th century verse-‘*Imamchuri*’, the characters Hassan-Hossain were completely identical to the popular Hindu mythological characters of Krishna-Balram to suit the understanding of the Bengali Muslim readers³⁷. It cannot also be overlooked that the ‘purification’ ideas did not find an easy way of acceptance. Despite the reformers eloquent claims, the rural Muslims continued with their older way of life to a marked degree. The new vision of the reformers was shared by only a handful of the Muslims and could thus manage a minor partial success in India, while the majority of the Muslims remained committed to the traditional practices.³⁸ The practices condemned as heretical by the fundamentalist reformers a hundred years ago were found persisting at every level of Bengali Muslim society as late as the 1960s³⁹.

³⁶ Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, Princeton Univ Press, New Jersey, 1983, p. 251.

³⁷ Sukumar Sen, *Islami Bangla Sahitya*, Kolkata, Ananda Publication, Kolkata, 1973, p. 49.

³⁸ Rafiuddin Ahmed, *op.cit.*, p.70.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.71.

The direct impact of political and social scenario could be seen in the literary history of the 19th century Bengal (especially the late 19th century). Bengali literature provided crucially important evidence of the social turmoil of the period; not only did it reflect social and political perceptions and attitudes, it also created them. The establishment of British rule in Bengal brought about a new era in Bengali literature. The introduction of the English language in the educational institutions of the province enabled the Bengalis to come into contact with Western literature and science. “European handbooks and manuals took them by surprise. They disclosed a world to them of which they knew nothing”⁴⁰.

The Bengali Muslims and Hindus took two different trajectories in the evolution of their literary traditions. On the one hand, the Bengali Hindus welcomed the introduction of English language. On the other, the Bengali Muslims primarily stayed aloof from the new education system.

The 19th century witnessed the birth of the modern “Bengali Literature” after an era of dissolution and the influence of the Christian missionaries cannot be overlooked in the development of the modern Bengali style of writing. However the dynamic and vivacious style of Bengali writing has to be attributed to Raja Rammohon Roy’s work on the issues of current day. Amongst the Bengali Hindus, the real prospect of the Bengali style of writing was brought to light by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Akshay Kumar Datta. Bankim Chandra is considered the father of the modern novel in India. Sarat Chandra Chatterjee was another novelist of merit in the early twentieth century. Michael Madhusudan Dutt was the first person to break free from the traditional bonds and successfully adapt the European style of writing into Bengali poetry. In the twentieth century the patriotic fervour inspired poets like Kazi Nazrul Islam. Calcutta was the scene of the birth of the modern drama in Bengali. Bengali dramas played an important role in conveying nationalism and ideas of social change to the common man. Bengali literature reached new heights in the works of Rabindranath Tagore who blended Vaishnava lyricism, the vigour of the folk medium and Western influences.

⁴⁰ D.C.Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1954, p.882.

However, it was a different story altogether when it came to the Bengali Muslims and their acceptance of the English language. The Muslims had tended to hold aloof from the educational system established by the British. When the growth of reformist movements within the community (the Wahabi and Faraizi movements) – were taken by the British to be subversive and were suppressed, the Bengali Muslims were driven further into isolation. Largely cut off from Western sources of inspiration, the Muslims continued to write older verse tradition. The rejection of English or of the Sanskritised Bengali which had been adapted by the Hindus as a substitute for English was expressed in the large growth of a ‘Punthi’ literature written by the Bengali Muslims. The term Punthi has the original meaning of a handwritten manuscript in Bengali. With the advent of printing, the meaning of the word was extended to include all Bengali printed works in verse. From the 19th century the terms ‘*Ecchlami Bangla*’ (Islami Bengali) came to be applied to the growing volume of a new type of Muslim punthi literature written in a highly stylized form of mixed Urdu-Bengali diction⁴¹.

As a brand of popular or subaltern literature, the punthis have two important and noticeable aspects: one linguistic, the other thematical. Most experts (including Sukumar Sen, Dinesh Sen, and James Long) have called the language of Punthis as Mussalmani Bangla due to the abundance of Arabic and Persian words. On the other hand, modern scholars like Muhammad Abdul Hai and Syed Ali Ahsan (given the presence of both Islamic and pure Bengali words in the language), branded the variety as ‘Dobhasi Punthi’. But, actually, Punthi language contained in itself a large number of words of Hindi and Turkish origin other than Arabic and Persian, including Bengali. In view of this fact Anisuzzaman the noted scholars and Bengali has preferred to call it a ‘hybrid’ language instead of Mussalmani Bangala or Dobhasi Punthi. Asim Roy, in course of classification, has pointed out that few Punthis like *Eusuf-Zolekha*, *Laila-Majnu*, *Hatem-Tai*, and *Gole-Bakauli* by nature of their stories can be called romantic stories⁴². Under the second category fall those ‘communal punthis’ like *Ameer Hamza* and *Jangnama* which depict anecdotes of suppression of Kafirs or infidels by the Muslim heroes. There was yet another class which described

⁴¹ Asim Roy, op.cit, p. 251

⁴² Ibid.

the exploits of Muslim Pirs and Fakirs who established their supremacy over the Hindu folk deities after opposition. Punthis like *Banbibir Jangnama*, *Kalu Gazi Champabati*, *Lalmohan*, and *Satyapirer Punthi* come under this class⁴³.

For all practical purposes, Punthis provided a basis as well as inexhaustible materials for the community mythology and community literature for the Muslims, and there rested the importance of the Punthis. It was, therefore, the task of the modern Muslim writers and litterateurs to reinterpret and reconstruct these Muslim community legends as per their predilections. The Muslim writers could draw their materials from a vast and infinitely interesting written literature in the form of the Punthis. The punthi literature points towards a syncretistic tradition among the Muslims of Bengal. It also clearly point to the existence of an exogenous Islamic tradition based on Perso-Arabic literatures that obviously failed to interact with the world of the exclusively Bengali speaking Muslims, and was consequently set aside for them in favour of a locally more familiar and meaningful syncretistic Islamic tradition⁴⁴.

The potent and rather disturbing consequences of the situation arising essentially from the linguistic cleavage, namely the inability of Bengali Muslims to follow books in Arabic and Persian, the resultant problems concerning appreciation of their own religious and cultural traditions, and their ultimate reliance on pre-existing 'non-Muslim Bengali' traditions were clearly brought out in early Muslim Bengali writings. There was "no dearth of kitabs in Arabic and Persian" which were "for the learned alone, and not for the ignorant folk"- the latter in the circumstances were "unable to grasp a single precept of their religion" and remained "immersed in stories and fictions"; "in every house the Hindus and Muslims" took themselves "with avid interest" to the Hindu epic, the *Mahabharat*, rendered into Bengali, and nobody thought about Khoda and Rasul"⁴⁵.

⁴³ Sukumar Sen, *Islami Bangla Sahitya*, Ananda Publication, Kolkata, 1973, p. 71.

⁴⁴ Asim Roy, *op.cit.*, p.69

⁴⁵ Sukumar Sen, *op.cit.*, p. 25.

However slowly but steadily, the continuous flow of at least the syncretistic literary tradition maintained through several centuries suffered a 'progressive contraction',⁴⁶ both in quantity and quality. The more literate Bengali Muslims gradually moved in the direction of a new form of Islamic literature of historical, biographical, and polemical nature, written not in conventional verse but in modern prose (to create their own Islamic identity).

Towards the end of the 19th century few Muslim writers did appear who broke from the old tradition and produced literary works in Sanskritised, rather than Persianised Bengali. The first such Muslim writer was Khondkar Shamsuddin Muhammad Siddiqui and after him came Meer Mosharraf Hossain (1848-1912), one of the most outstanding Muslim writers in the first decade of the 20th century. One of the most interesting phenomena of the period was the emergence of a group of Bengali Muslims, who wrote in sanskritised Bengali, but whose aim was definitely to arouse the community consciousness. The change in the medium was accompanied by new attitudes in the writers. In this these authors produced novels, prose, dramas and other English forms and showed a new awareness of what had been going on in the Hindu Bengali renaissance⁴⁷. The contents of these writings show reactions to the social and political situation. Some were traditional conservative, some were communal, and others were modernists, western-looking, nationalists. These works can be roughly categorized under religious, social and political themes.

It is important to cite some examples from each of these categories. Religious works, were the most numerous⁴⁸, they revolved around the themes like the lives of the Prophet and defending Islam or arguing its superiority over other religions, notably Hinduism and Christianity. *Upadesa-Sangraha* (1891), by Maulvi Alauddin Ahmed, was a collection of Arabic translation of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. There were many translations of the *Quran Sharif*, *Fatwa-i-Alamgiri*, *Sa'adat* etc⁴⁹. In the

⁴⁶ A term used by Asim Roy in *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*.

⁴⁷ Sufia Ahmed, *Muslim Community in Bengal 1884-1912*, OUP, Dhaka, 1974.

⁴⁸ A point accepted by both the scholars: Sufia Ahmed, *Muslim Community in Bengal 1884-1912*; Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims (1871-1906): A Quest for Identity*, OUP, Delhi, 1981.

⁴⁹ A.K. Chakraborty, *Bengali Muslim Literati & the Development of Muslim Community in Bengal*, IAS, Shimla, 2002.

year 1897, Sheikh Abdur Rahim's '*Islam*' dealt with the principles of the Muslim religion as Wazu (ablution), Roza, Namaz, Zakat and Hajj. A similar work was presented by Kazi Abdul Aziz Koreshi in 1905. Another work of instruction was the work in verse published in 1909 by Dewan Naseruddin Ahmed, the '*Ramzan Sharif*'. The main message of the book was that if a man faithfully observes Ramzan, then his sins will be forgiven and God will look kindly on him. A noticeable feature of the Muslim religious literature was the glorification of the Muslims and their past. By reviving the historical and cultural traditions of the Muslims in the past, they wanted to bring about their intellectual and moral revival and thought that their past would instruct and inspire them to move with the progressive forces of the time and to work with faith and confidence for their socio-political development.

Periodicals like *Moslem Darpan*, *Al-Eslam*, *Akhbare-Eslamia*, *Hafez*, *Islam-Pracharak* and *Ahle-Hadith* etc. aimed particularly at the educated or semi-educated youths who were ignorant even of the simple rules of Wazu and Namaz⁵⁰. The idea that 'prosperous nation', if deteriorated, could only revive by remembering the ancient glory of the nation; inspired some writers to write on the glorious history of the past. Kaikobad's *Mahashashan Kabya*, *Shiv Mandir*, and *Mahram Shareef*; Mazammel Haque's, '*Hazrat Mohomed*'; Hamid Ali's *Qasimbadh Kabya*, are historical fictions which was directed to bring out the glory of the Muslims⁵¹.

Under the heading of fiction are to be grouped some works which are mixtures of oriental tales and English novel in form. Some of these are drawn from the great store of Persian literature: the classical tales of love of Shirin and Farhad, of Laila and Majnu, of Yusuf and Zuleikha⁵². Coming to writings on social topics we find that there were many Muslims who desired changes in the existing condition of their society and expressed their feelings through their writings⁵³. *Kalir Charitra Kavita*,

⁵⁰ Mustafa Nurul Islam, *Bengali Muslim Opinion as Reflected in the Bengali Press (1901-1930)*, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1973, p. 127.

⁵¹ A.K. Chakraborty, *Bengali Muslim Literati & the Development of Muslim Community in Bengal*, IIAS, Shimla, 2002

⁵² Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal, *Bengali Press & Literary Writing*, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1977

⁵³ Emran Hossain, *Bengali Muslim Budhijibi: Chinta O Karma*, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1993

the book contains a collection of sketches which reprove the immoral and irreligious practices affecting Muslim society.

Such an attitude was not shared by all the Bengali Muslims, there were some writers who adapted themselves to modern and western ideas. In *Ghaji Miar Bastani* (1900), Meer Mosharraf Hossain came out vigorously against the degraded social life of the Muslims of the day; he criticized the narrow outlook towards the Muslim women in the society. On the other hand we see Munshi Meherullah, attacked the Hindus for refusing to permit widow remarriage and sought to show, by quoting passages from Manu that the remarriage of widows was not forbidden by the great Hindu law-givers⁵⁴. A particularly popular work on the position of women in Muslim society of Bengal – and an extremely critical work at that was the volume of essays entitled *Matichur* by Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain (1880-1932). Her writings are important as they give a true picture of the condition of Bengali Muslim women of her day. The injustices and intolerance of society towards women moved her to the depths and she gave vent to her feelings against such treatment through her pen⁵⁵.

Similarly concern was shown about the Muslim ryots in Bengal. Meer Mosharraf Hossain's *Udandsina Pathiker Maner Katha* (1890). In this he describes the rudeness which Europeans generally displayed towards the ryot, and the fear that the ryots had towards the planters. *Jamindar Darpan* (1873) was also written by him on the Zamindar's oppression. The increased sympathy of the literati towards the ryot was, however, reflected in their writings from the early 20th century onwards and the writers were not only vocal in defending the peasantry against the exploitation of landlords and *mahajans* (moneylenders) but also offered some suggestions so as to enable the peasants to avert poverty and get their condition improved.

The political and social thought as reflected through the literature of the Bengali Muslims show divergent strands amongst the Muslim intellectuals. It appears that no single political thought dominated the Bengali Muslim literati and there were divergence of views among them on the question of co-operation and non-co-operation with the British Government, participation along with other communities in

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 345

⁵⁵ Ibid. p.346

the Indian National Congress, the establishment of a separate political organization for protecting and promoting Muslim interests and supporting a Pan-Islamic movement to protect the interests of Muslim abroad. Mir Mosharraf Hossain came out to be an exponent of Hindu-Muslim unity and wrote *Go-Jivan* (1888). However, in the last phase of his literary career his attitude towards the Hindus changed and he became more and more inclined towards orthodoxy⁵⁶. Kaikobad pleaded for Hindu-Muslim unity but at the same time he also emphasized on the ancient glory and fortune of the Muslims and voicing his pain at seeing the degraded condition of the Muslims. Pan-Islamic unity was sought by most of the writers of the late 19th century⁵⁷.

Hindu-Muslim unity and Pan-Islamic ideology was also quite prevalent amongst the authors of the late 19th century and early 20th century. It not only appealed the educated Muslim Bengalis but also the masses. A history of the Greco-Turkish war was written in 1905 in the Do-Bhashi language – a language spoken by the common Muslims; this book had a widespread appeal among the Muslims of Bengal⁵⁸. The Muslims of Bengal whether politically loyal to British or opposed to the British, their spiritual loyalty belonged to the Sultan of Turkey⁵⁹. Kazi Nazrul Islam was a product of this period. His ideas, ideologies and poetic expressions were influenced in a big way by his Muslim birth.

The Chapters-

The following chapters look into the various aspects of Nazrul's writings while situating them within the larger historical background. Nazrul's contribution in the literary field has won him the epithet 'bidrohi'. Our endeavour in the following chapters would be to see if this epithet really justified the poet's work. In the next chapter we would like to begin with a detailed study of Nazrul's life and work for our understanding of his historic importance. Thereafter we shall attempt to trace the

⁵⁶ Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal, *Bengali Press & Literary Writing*, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1977

⁵⁷ A.K. Chakraborty, *Bengali Muslim Literati & the Development of Muslim Community in Bengal*, IIAS, Shimla, 2002

⁵⁸ Sufia Ahmad, op.cit. p. 358.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

influences from the past which shaped and impacted his thought processes. Our intention here is not to present a summary of events but offer a brief account of the nature and evolution of the creative talent of the poet. The chapter would also provide the readers with a brief summary of Nazrul's rather uneven literary graph. An outline of the poet's literary career, in the second chapter, would help the readers to understand the nitty-gritty of Nazrul's ideological evolution and his contribution to 20th century intellectual history of Bengal.

The third chapter is divided into two parts and these two parts are then further divided into various sub-sections. This chapter discusses the socio-political ideology of the poet. The poet wrote extensively on the political condition of the 20th century colonial India. Most of his writings were directed against the colonial state. He believed that only armed struggle could gain us our independence from the British shackles. Having said this, we also need to see if the poet welcomed the other alternatives to attain independence or not? For example, Nazrul once praised Gandhi and later went on to criticize him. His praise for Gandhi came in during the Non-cooperation movement; and the criticism came in when the movement was called off. This chapter also tries to shed light on Nazrul's association with the revolutionaries in Bengal and to what extent he was influenced by them. The next sub-section tries to evaluate Nazrul's leftward inclination. The Left politics in Bengal has often tried to appropriate Nazrul as their torch-bearer. However, this association needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. The first part of this chapter further traces Nazrul's journey as a political prisoner and the details of his proscribed literature.

The second part of this chapter discusses the social ideology of Nazrul. This section tries to look at the poet's take on the issue of caste and women. I try to examine if Nazrul had anything new to offer in his understanding of the caste system prevalent in the society. It would be interesting to see how Nazrul looked at the role of women within the family and her contribution towards the society, at large. Nazrul has often been given the credit of writing many path-breaking poems and essays on women, questioning the existing stereotype in the society. My attempt here would be to see if Nazrul's opinion on women had anything in common with the reformers or the nationalists? Was he merely looking at them through the lens of the nationalists' or he had anything different to offer?

When it came to writing about the caste system, it is important to mention here that Nazrul had a firsthand experience with the rigid system at a very young age; and his curt response on this issue came spontaneously. While analyzing what Nazrul wrote on caste, it would be equally necessary to see if Nazrul saw caste as a social phenomenon or a political one? What was it that Nazrul offered as a solution to get rid of this rigid system? Overall, this chapter attempts to place Nazrul's ideology historically. I try to trace if his opinion changed, on any given issue, over a period of time. If yes, then what led to that change? An effort is made to question both internal and external factors that facilitate such changes. As historians, we should always be able to show the evolution in a given genre.

The fourth chapter is on Nazrul's religious ideology. Though this is the most speculated upon and controversial aspect of the poet's life, none of his biographers actually attempt at problematizing Nazrul's idea on religion. None of his biographies have a fair amount of space dedicated to the poet's religious views. An extremely important issue that most biographers fail to acknowledge is that – Nazrul's religious ideology (as portrayed by Nazrul researchers and biographers) is closely intertwined with his identity on both sides of the border. On the Indian side (West Bengal) it is Nazrul's Shyama Sangeet/Uma sangeet or Vaishnav pada that finds prominence (while ignoring the other religious writings). On the other hand, in Bangladesh, it is the poet's Islamic writings that are much talked about. Thus this chapter tries to see the poet's vast contribution to the genre of religious writings, holistically.

The fifth chapter deals with Nazrul's multiple identities, as constructed by the political agents of West Pakistan, East Pakistan and India. This chapter also studies closely the transition from 'people's poet' to the 'national poet'. This chapter contributes to the way we look at this literary figure in the recent times. How the three neighbouring countries India, Pakistan and Bangladesh appropriated literary figures Rabindranath Tagore, Iqbal and Nazrul keeping in mind their religious and linguistic identities.

To conclude then, despite echoing universal sentiments, Nazrul's literary works have not received much deserved world attention. What could be the reason for that? Prof. Rafiqul Islam (a major figure in Nazrul studies) claims "Nazrul has not been translated widely. Though there have been attempts to translate Nazrul's work into

Russian, Chinese, Japanese, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Farsi, Urdu, Hindi and Tamil, Nazrul has yet to receive a proper global exposure. We have not yet been successful in motivating the few western translators who understand Bangla. Probably they consider him as "subaltern", rather than a major poet of the first half of twentieth century”.

Can Nazrul’s relative lack of prominence as a writer or individual be partly a function of class? Was Nazrul was really the poor man’s poet or at best of the educated lower middle class who may have empathized and appreciated his poetry but could not secure for him social prominence? Nazrul came from a humble social background and his life was full of struggle and economic insecurities. Many figures associated with the Hindu and Muslim renaissance in colonial India viz. Rammohun Roy, Vivekananda, Tagore, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Mohammad Iqbal shot into prominence because they travelled abroad and found a Western audience. Is it that if some Western author had translated Nazrul (as Yeats did for Tagore) perhaps Nazrul would have been far better known?

Chapter – 2

Amidst Thunder and Storm – The Making of a Poet

“Main akela chala tha jaanib-e-manzil magar
Log saath aate gaye, karavaan banta gaya¹”

(I had started on my journey alone,
But people joined along and we became a caravan)

This famous couplet by Majrooh Sultanpuri concisely describes Kazi Nazrul Islam’s journey. Nazrul’s life was never a steady graph; it was a roller-coaster ride. One event led to another, one tragedy followed another. Getting to put all his life events in one string, especially when the poet never canonized himself, is an uphill task. In this chapter, my work primarily is to explore the interplay between my subject’s public and private life. I sought to understand the patterns of choices he made in each sphere. An individual is not shaped in isolation; he is a product of the circumstances around him. Similarly, the ideological choices are not made randomly; they are sub-consciously made by evaluating the pros and cons of a particular decision. This chapter seeks to give an inner view of Nazrul’s private life to the readers. What made him align to certain set of ideas as oppose to the other. Since his private life is inseparable from the public life, we shall touch upon very briefly on the socio-political environment of the period. Much detail about the period and the choices (the socio-political ideological choices) Nazrul made shall be discussed in the next chapter.

Many biographers have tried to divide Nazrul’s life into four phases. These four phases have been divided chronologically, for instance, the initial phase being his formative years (1899 to 1919), then the ‘rebel’ phase (1920 – 1930), followed by the ‘ghazal/music/spiritual’ phase (1931 – 1942), and finally the ‘bed-ridden/ mute’ phase (1942 – 1976). I remain a bit skeptical with these almost formulaic divisions, especially when a person belongs to the creative field! A human’s thoughts cannot be divided into watertight compartments. At times an individual might go overboard with

¹ This couplet was composed by Majrooh Sultanpuri. Majrooh Sultanpuri (1919 - 2000), real name – Asrar Hassan Khan, was a renowned Urdu poet, song-writer and lyricist in Hindi film industry.

some predominant ideas but that does not wipe out the other existing ideas. Ideas travel through time. On the other hand, we can mark his/her educational years and visits to places in dates and years, not thoughts. We cannot devise a mechanism to mark each line of thought with each passing day, month or year. I do not intend to periodise Nazrul's life in four simple parts. Rather, my attempt here would be to narrate Nazrul's life the way it was – a complex and chaotic set of events happening simultaneously. His tumultuous life cannot be simplified in four chronological sub-heads.

Introducing Dukhu Mian –

Dukhu Mian² was born on 24th May 1899, in Churulia, Burdwan district, Bengal. Dukhu Mian, born to Kazi Fakir Ahmed and Zaheda Khatun, was the sixth son to this poverty stricken family³. Though Fakir Ahmed descended from a line of Kazis (judges), by the time Dukhu was born the family had been living on the poverty line⁴. Quiet aptly this new family member was called Dukhu Mian, as the family had nothing good to offer to the new born, and a much predictable life filled with sorrows and hardships was waiting to embrace him. However, life's cauldron had an entirely different narration to offer. For Fakir Ahmed and Zaheda Khatun he might be just Dukhu Mian, but for us he is 'Bidrohi Kobi Nazrul' or the 'rebel poet Nazrul'. Dukhu Mian, here onwards Kazi Nazrul Islam, the national poet of Bangladesh, treaded an unconventional path; a path that no one had imagined for him.

Nazrul's father was the *khidmatgar* (caretaker) and also the *imam* (priest) of the village mosque. Nazrul learnt his initial Arabic, Persian and Urdu lessons from his father, who was also the teacher at the nearby *maktab* (elementary school). Nazrul was one of the students at the *maktab*. Along with language skills, the *maktab* made Nazrul aware of the Islamic religious practices. Nazrul was all of eight when his father passed away. The family slipped to further lows and Nazrul at that tender age

² 'Dukhu mian' refers to a person who is laden with sorrows all through his life. It is derived from the word 'Dukh' meaning sorrow and mian means Mister. Thus the name being – Mr. Sorrow

³ Rafiqul Islam, *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Jiban o Kabita*, Mullick Brothers, Dhaka, 1982, p. 5 – 10.

⁴ Ibid

had to work as a *muazzin*⁵ at the mosque. Nazrul's stay in Churulia, no matter how short, had left a deep impact on him. This rather small village bore the relics of both Hindu and Muslim traditions and upheld syncretic values amongst the villagers. Churulia was home to both, Raja Narottam Singh's fort and the *mazar* (enshrined tomb) of Haji Pehalwan⁶. One of Nazrul's earliest poems *Bhagnastup*, 1917 (The Remains) was inspired by the remains of Raja Narottam's fort⁷.

If on one hand the village *maktab* gave Nazrul an exposure to Islamic practices, his stint at the *Leto*⁸ helped him know the Hindu traditions⁹. Nazrul's uncle, Bazle Karim had appointed Nazrul as one of his helpers in the group. Very soon Nazrul started composing his own prose and drama and set them to tune. This form of folk-cultural group very often transcended any perceived barrier among people of different religions and backgrounds. The troupe of musicians/poets used instruments like the bamboo clarinet, harmonium, tabla and dhol for their performances¹⁰. The acting style used to be loud, powerful and dramatic, emboldened with social messages, political rhetoric, and mythological themes¹¹. A *Leto* performance was a two way process, it comprised of two groups and involved a question-answer session. The question-answer session was, in a poetical/ lyrical manner. Each group had a *Goda Kobi* (lead-poet) who was to answer the questions volleyed by the other group. A *Leto* was then an impromptu act and gave a sense of contest between two poets. Nazrul's avid participation in *Leto* soon generated an exceptional command over impromptu composition in him.

⁵ A person who calls for prayer from the minaret of a mosque

⁶ Haji Pehalwan was a popular Muslim saint.

⁷ Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay, *Keu Bhole na Keu Bhole*, New Age Publishers, Kolkata, 1960.

⁸ *Leto* refers to a rural folk cultural group or musical party.

⁹ The poets drew from both Hindu and Muslim mythologies. Traces of Sufi, Vaishnava, Shakta and Baul traditions enriched the *Leto* performances.

¹⁰ Pramita Bose, "Leto: An Endangered Art Form", *The Asian Age*, Kolkata, March 27, 2015.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

After Nazrul had gained an experience of three to four years of working at a Leto and after the death of Bazle Karim, Nazrul took over as the *Goda Kobi* of a group. However, this did not continue for long as Nazrul could hardly make ends meet. From Churulia he now moved to Asansol; a shift from village to a sub-divisional town. Nazrul's struggle did not end here and he started working at a tea-stall. This job earned him food but not shelter. As a result, he used to sleep under the staircase of a nearby building. The owner of that building, Kazi Rafizullah (sub-inspector of Police) was impressed by Nazrul and decided to put him back in school¹². Nazrul's new school was in Kazir Shimla, a village in Mymensingh district (now in Bangladesh). He stayed at Rafizullah's ancestral home. Subsequently, Nazrul earned himself a tuition waiver and excelled at the first annual examination in 1914¹³.

Barely a year passed and Nazrul had already made up his mind to move out from the school¹⁴. His next destination was Raniganj (near Churulia, Burdwan district). Nazrul got admission at Shiarsol Raj High school. He attended this school for a period of three years, from 1915 to 1917. The school had provided hostel accommodation for Nazrul's stay. Quite expectedly, Nazrul yet again came to the limelight due to his academic excellence and cultural participation. Three years of Nazrul's stay at the school had three different layers of experience in store for him. First, Satish Kanjilal, a music teacher at the school, took keen interest in Nazrul and started imparting Hindustani classical musical training to Nazrul. Second, Hafiz¹⁵ Nurun Nabi, Persian teacher, insisted Nazrul to take up Persian as his second language instead of Sanskrit¹⁶. Third and foremost was Nazrul's association with Nibaran Chandra Ghatak. Though Nibaran Ghatak was a teacher at the school, his actual identity was that of a revolutionary. Nibaran Ghatak was a key member of the revolutionary group *Jugantar*. Early 1917, Nibaran was arrested on the charges of keeping illegal

¹² Kazi Rafizullah had initially appointed Nazrul as his domestic help. It was only later that he realized that Nazrul had an exceptional talent and was not meant to be servant. Rafiqul Islam, op.cit, p. 11-16.

¹³ Rafiqul Islam, ibid

¹⁴ The exact reasons for this change of place are not well known to us, though some claim that Nazrul felt out of place and longed for his family.

¹⁵ Hafiz is a title given to a man who knows the Koran by heart.

¹⁶ Muzaffar Ahmad, *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Smritikatha*, National Book Agency, Kolkata, 1965, p. 222-23.

firearms. During this period, Nazrul also met Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay¹⁷ who later went on to give extensive details about Nazrul's life in his book *Keu Bhole na Keu Bhole* (1960).

Coincidentally, 1917 was also the year when the Colonial power was keen on establishing a Bengal regiment. Recruitments to the regiment were on full swing when it caught Nazrul's attention. It has been recollected by Shailajananda that Nazrul's decision to join the army was primarily based on idea of armed rebellion; to throw the English out of the country¹⁸. Attracted by the thought of using training arms in the service of the freedom movement, Nazrul and his schoolmate, Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay decided to join the army. Nazrul decided to join the British army not because (as commonly supposed), he wanted to safeguard the British Empire, but because he wanted to fight it. Inspired by the example of a revolutionary like Nibaranchandra Ghatak he wanted to obtain armed training for himself and then, on retiring from army, impart training to the batches of young men in the skill of using arms aimed at armed operations against the British rulers and their native collaborators¹⁹. Nazrul's political views were also shaped through his experience with the army during 1917 when he joined the 49th Bengal Regiment. However, his joining the army was not a completely new step. For example, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907), the educationist, theologian, journalist, and teacher gave up his studies and went to Gwalior to attend a military course as he, at that time, believed that

¹⁷ Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay (1901-1976), one of Nazrul's contemporaries and close friends. Later on became a famous story-writer. Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay's autobiography, *Keu Bhole na Keu Bhole*, New Age Publishers, Kolkata, 1960, has extensive accounts of Nazrul's early life and the camaraderie shared by the two.

¹⁸ Both Pranatosh Chattopadhyay in *Kaji Nojrul*, Kolkata, A. Mukherjee & Co, Kolkata, 1977, and Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay in *Keu Bhole na Keu Bhole*, have spoken about Nazrul's idea of armed rebellion against the British.

¹⁹ Pranatosh Chattopadhyay, op.cit, p. 18.

military action alone could bring freedom to India²⁰. He wished to join the army of Maharaja of Gwalior to “learn the art of war and drive away the foreigner”²¹.

In the wake of the First World War, the British colonial power was in need of large number of troops. This constantly increasing need forced the colonizers to establish the 49th Bengal regiment, which was to be stationed at Karachi²². Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay in his autobiography recollects that the recruitment was highly encouraged by the political leaders in Bengal. It was seen as an opportunity to wipe off the effeminate image of the Bengalis²³. Nazrul and his friend Shailajananda enrolled themselves for the recruitment. Since all the recruitment formalities were to be done from Kolkata, both the friends shifted their base to Kolkata. However, it was only Nazrul who passed the medical test and got a position in the regiment²⁴. Nazrul got a new experience in life with his recruitment in the army. Before being stationed at Karachi, this regiment underwent training at Naushera (now in Pakistan). Nazrul’s experiences at the training grounds have been well described in his short story ‘Rikter Bedon’²⁵ (1921). The regiment was stationed at Karachi for nearly two and a half years from late 1917 to March 1920. The regiment was kept as a stand-by force all this while. It never took on to an actual battle field. The regiment was disbanded in 1920.

A series of letters from Shambhu Ray, a friend of Nazrul’s at the regiment, to Pranatosh Chattopadhyay gives us the accounts of the poet’s experience in the

²⁰ Mohan Lal, *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*, Vol.5, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1993, p.4431. Julius Lipner, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary*, OUP, USA, 1999.

²¹ Ashish Alexander, “A Forgotten Prophet”, *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, December 16, 2007.

²² Muzaffar Ahmed, op.cit, p. 9-10. Also in Rafiqul Islam, op.cit, pp. 21-22

²³ Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay, op.cit, pp. 118-19.

²⁴ Shailajananda’s rejection was a well construed step, his family made it happen using their contacts in the regiment. Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay, op.cit., p. 133-35

²⁵ *Rikter Bedon*, Nazrul Rachana Samagra (from here on wards it would be referred as NRS), Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 1, p. 317.

barracks²⁶. The letters exposed the ‘political’ and ‘poetical’ side of Nazrul. During his stay, Nazrul got closer to a *maulavi* (Muslim religious instructor) who was also stationed at the barrack. Nazrul imbibed within him the expertise the *maulavi* had to offer on Persian language. Under the *maulavi*’s guidance Nazrul took keen interest in Hafez’s²⁷ poetry. Hafez’s Sufism left a deep impact on Nazrul. Almost ten years after his barrack days, in 1930 Nazrul went on to translate Hafez’s *Rubbaiyyat*²⁸. The political part of Nazrul’s character was also sustained. He showed tremendous interest in the Bolshevik revolution (1917). Despite the British vigilance to prevent any kind of political news seeping in to the barracks, Nazrul used his secret tie-ups to procure news-papers. He shared a newspaper article with a detailed account of the Bolshevik revolution with others²⁹. As mentioned earlier, Nazrul’s traits of being ‘political’ and ‘poetical’ garnered much curiosity amongst his friends and family, who often labeled him as a ‘rebel’. Usually people choose either of the paths. But Nazrul chose to combine both into one and earned himself the epithet of being the ‘rebel’.

Time and again Nazrul’s pro-Bolshevik stance has been seen as his first glimpse of rebellious ideology. However, comrade Muzaffar Ahmed³⁰ in his memoir has refuted the fact that Nazrul was the lone soul who showed interest in the Bolshevik revolution. On the contrary, Muzaffar Ahmed opines that a considerable number of Indian soldiers were inspired by the Bolsheviks. Nazrul was not the only pro-Bolsheviks, there were many like him³¹. The Karachi barrack stay got over by March

²⁶ Letters from Shambhu Ray to Pranatosh Chattopadhyay reproduced in Pranatosh Chattopadhyay’s, *Kaji Nojrul*, Kolkata, A. Mukherjee & Co, Kolkata, 1977, p. 290-298. A set of five letters have been reproduced in this book. See also, *Nazrul Patraboli*, Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, 1978.

²⁷ Shams al-Din Hafez Shirazi (1325-1389), a legendary Persian poet, has been known across the globe for his finesse in poetry. Hafiz wrote on everything, starting from love, nature, mundane daily lives to religious fanaticism. Hafez also composed Ghazals.

²⁸ *Rubbaiyyat*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 2, pp. 221-242.

²⁹ Letter from Shambhu Ray to Pranatosh Chattopadhyay, reproduced in Pranatosh Chattopadhyay, *op.cit.*, p. 291.

³⁰ Comrade Muzaffar Ahmed, one of the lifelong friend and patrons of Nazrul, who also spent considerable length of time working together on many projects of common interest, provides some additional insights to Nazrul’s political and social ideology, to situations which compelled Nazrul to take decision regarding his personal life.

³¹ Muzaffar Ahmed, *op.cit.*, pp. 104-105.

1920. It was time for Nazrul to choose between two jobs he had in hand. One was offered by the colonial govt. and the other by the literary community in Kolkata. The govt. offered Nazrul the post of sub-registrar, the job was being offered to the soldiers disbanded from the regiment. On the other hand, it was Muzaffar Ahmed and Shailajananda's group which persuaded Nazrul to be a part of the literary world.

Going a little back in time before the army was disbanded; Nazrul had established some contacts in Kolkata. These contacts helped Nazrul get his few initial write-ups published. One such contact was comrade Muzaffar Ahmed. Nazrul's acquaintance with Ahmed grew into eternal camaraderie through the former's continuous contribution in the *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samiti Patrika*. Ahmed was the assistant secretary to the *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samiti* (Bengal Muslim literary Society) and managed its quarterly, *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samiti Patrika*. Nazrul published almost eight of his compositions in *BMS Patrika*³²; Nazrul would send these writings via post to Muzaffar Ahmed, a person he had not yet met. Their only way of communication was the literary writings. Soon this formal literary conversation grew closer and in other words, it evolved into a deep personal friendship³³.

Nazrul's very first publication was a short story called 'Baundeler Atmukahini'³⁴ (Autobiography of a Vagabond), published by *Saogat*³⁵ (Presentation) in May 1919. Till March 1920, Nazrul wrote few other pieces, all published in *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika*. Muzaffar Ahmed was the man behind getting these write-ups published. In one such write-up Nazrul attached a personal note to Ahmed stating his dwindling future prospects after the disbandment of the regiment³⁶. Recognizing the embedded literary talent in Nazrul, Ahmed offered him to write for his journal. Thus

³² Muzaffar Ahmed, op.cit. p. 101

³³ *Ibid*

³⁴ *Baundeler Atmukahini*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 1, p. 330.

³⁵ *Saogat*, published in 1918, Calcutta, welcomed a new era. It supported Bengali Muslims by providing them the platform to publish. This was also the first journal to encourage Muslim women by dedicating an edition exclusively for them.

³⁶ Muzaffar Ahmed, op.cit. pp.8-10.

began a completely new phase in Nazrul's life, a decision which gave us the 'rebel' poet.

Kazi Nazrul Islam started his newly found literary career at the office of Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samiti. Since he did not have a place to stay in Kolkata, a room within the office was shared by both Ahmed and Nazrul³⁷. It is usually not so easy to get a platform to showcase your talent at a public forum. Nazrul got it fairly easily. It became easier for him to put his thoughts into words and then pass it on to the public to read. Apart from his own compositions, Nazrul also tried his hand on journalism and news reporting. 'Mukti' was the first poem to be published in BMS Patrika. Apart from this, there were two short stories, namely, 'Hena' and 'Byathar Dan' and his translation of a ghazal by Hafez³⁸. While things were falling in place in Nazrul's professional life, not everything was peaceful at the personal front. After the dissolution of the regiment and prior to joining the BMS Patrika, Nazrul had little time to meet his family in Churulia. Ahmed claims that relation between Nazrul and his mother had turned sour after this visit³⁹ in 1919, though the actual reason for this still remains untold.

Exploring a New Profession - the Literary Path⁴⁰ –

The next major move in Nazrul's career was his association with *Nabojug* (a Bengali evening daily). This daily was started by both Ahmed and Nazrul, though it was funded by the renowned Abul Kashem Fazlul Haq (1873-1962). Muzaffar Ahmed in his memoir recollects that Fazlul Haq wanted them to have a more religious (Islam oriented) name for the daily. Fazlul wanted the Muslim population as his readers. However, both Nazrul and Ahmed insisted on a secular name to attract a wider reader base. *Nabojug* came out in circulation from 12th July 1920. Nazrul displayed his enormous writing skills via this daily. He wrote on various themes, from colonial

³⁷ Ibid, p.14

³⁸ Ibid, p. 16

³⁹ Ibid, p. 18

⁴⁰ Minute details of all the writings by Nazrul and his ideology shall be discussed in the next chapter.

subjugation, armed rebellion and workers' plight⁴¹ to hailing the Allah, praising the Hindu goddess Durga and preaching Hindu-Muslim brotherhood. Not just varying themes, he exhibited his vast Perso-Arabic vocabulary as well. His language connected with the masses. Moreover, most of his writings drew from both Hindu-Muslim traditions, they appealed to both the communities. However, this evening daily was very short-lived. Nazrul's anti-imperialistic writings grabbed the British attention; and soon the daily was served with a legal notice. The newspaper initially remained out of publication for two months (August-September 1920)⁴². By now Fazlul Haq was skeptical of continuing with Nazrul and Ahmed as the editors. Nazrul along with Muzaffar Ahmed left the newspaper in December 1920. With their exit, in a couple of months, the evening daily lost its readership and ceased to publish⁴³.

Nazrul was by now famous in the literary circle. His spontaneity and willingness to 'write on demand' made him widely acceptable! 'Writing on demand' meant that anybody who approached Nazrul with a request to write would have his wish granted. Class, creed, race or religion did not make any barrier whatsoever. 'Writing on demand' also meant that Nazrul was ready to write on any given topic at any given time. Writing about the labourers in *Nabojug* an example of Nazrul's 'writing on demand' nature. The exceptions were Muslim religious fanatics, who wanted Nazrul to limit his writings exclusively on Islam which he refused⁴⁴. For instance, Principal Ibrahim Khan (1894-1978) requested in a letter to Nazrul that he should **not** abandon his own community because: 'your abode is Muslim literature – Bengali Muslims are looking forward to the central message of Islam that will resound through your voice....nobody is there to claim the throne of the kingdom of Muslim literature in

⁴¹ Nazrul's inclination towards the workers and labourers did not come from within, he wrote on them after an insistence from Fazlul Haq. Haq had a large voting base from the labouring classes of East Bengal. Muzaffar Ahmed, op.cit. pp.33-34.

⁴² Muzaffar Ahmed, op.cit, p. 34

⁴³ Ibid, pp. 42-6.

⁴⁴ Nazrul's letter to Principal Ibrahim Khan (December 1927), NRS, Vol. 2, Kolkata, 2004, p. 482. Principal Ibrahim Khan (1894-1978), was a well-known Muslim educationist and intellectual of the time.

Bengal – you should take it. You deserve it.’⁴⁵ Nazrul however chose to remain dethroned.

As said earlier, Nazrul’s ‘writing on demand’ was something that made him more accessible to the people. He contributed to too many journals, magazines and dailies at a time. Also he would, if invited, go to any inauguration, felicitation, demonstration or strike and perform for the audience. Starting from jute-mill workers strike to fishermen and peasants, Nazrul would write/ sing/recite for all⁴⁶. ‘Writing on demand’ was a two way interaction between the poet and his audience. It gave Nazrul his creative satisfaction, helped him utilize his literary skills for a cause he felt for and believed in. On the other hand, for the audience he was easily approachable, his language was comprehensive even for the toiling masses. In most cases Nazrul’s demand in terms of money would be meager. Muzaffar Ahmed recollects that there have been occasions where Nazrul would perform for his audience over just a cup of tea and *paan* (betel leaf)⁴⁷. Nazrul’s aura was embedded in his being an ordinary man with extra-ordinary literary skills.

In December 1920, once Nazrul left *Nabojug* it was expected he would join another journal or daily or publication house. Instead, Nazrul chose to come up with his own political bi-weekly *Dhumketu* (The Comet). *Dhumketu* first appeared in August 1922. The gap years that is, after Nazrul left *Nabojug* and before he started *Dhumketu* shall be accounted for in the following sub-section of this chapter. This new initiative was much appreciated by Nazrul’s contemporaries and seniors. The first edition of *Dhumketu* had a congratulatory note from no less than Rabindranath Tagore, Barindra Kumar Ghosh⁴⁸ and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay⁴⁹ as well⁵⁰.

⁴⁵ Ibrahim Khan’s letter has been fully reproduced in Mustafa Nurul Islam’s *Samokale Nojrul*. Mustafa Nurul Islam, *Samokale Nojrul: 1920 - 1950*, Shilpkala Academy, Dhaka, 1983, p. 69.

⁴⁶ Muzaffar Ahmed, op.cit, p. 28

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 27.

⁴⁸ Barindra Kumar Ghosh was popularly known as Barin Ghosh (January 5, 1880 – April 18, 1959). He was a revolutionary and a journalist. He was one of the founder members of *Jugantar* – a revolutionary group in Bengal.

⁴⁹ Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (September 15, 1876 – January 16, 1938) is regarded as one of the most influential and significant figures of Indian literature.

Dhumketu, as the name suggests, was fierce in portraying the political thoughts of the contemporary period. Every edition of *Dhumketu* brought with it a glimpse of Nazrul's raging anger against all forms of subjugation and orthodoxies. Apart from articles on the plight of peasants and labourers, large numbers of articles were written against the British imperialist rule in the country. Though *Dhumketu* had other 'non-rebellious' themes to it, overall its impression of being a rebel-organ led the British government to ban it. It was the twelfth issue of *Dhumketu* which invited British proscription of the political biweekly. Not only was the journal proscribed, Nazrul was given rigorous imprisonment for a year. The proscription came through in September 1922 and Nazrul was taken into custody by November 1922⁵¹. *Dhumketu*, in government report was described as "preaches emancipation from all restraints – political, social, or religious, has an independent tone. Its peculiarity lay, however not only in its hostile attitude vis-à-vis the Government, but also and even more in its rampant preaching of revolt and destruction in respect of settled authority in all other spheres – social, economic or religious so much so that angry protest were noticed from Mohammedans, moderates and extremists"⁵².

Poetry and politics is a potent mix and Nazrul was a politically active poet. Yet it has to be kept in mind that all this activism was without being formally a part of any political party. He was a free-spirited socio-political activist who used poetry to convey his opinion for or against any issue. Anything that grabbed his attention would find a way through his poetical expression. He was fearless and wrote exactly what he wished to and therefore faced British wrath. However he was not the only one in doing so. His contemporaries and predecessors who invited British wrath through their writings included Dinabandhu Mitra⁵³, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay⁵⁴, Sarat

⁵⁰ *Dhumketu*, 1st edition, Vol.1, No.1, 11 August 1922, pp. 1-2

⁵¹ *Annual Report on Newspaper and Periodicals*, Bengal, 1923, National Library, Kolkata.

⁵² *Ibid*

⁵³ Dinabandhu Mitra a dramatist by profession showcased the conditions of the Indigo planters in his *Nil Darpan*, 1860. The literary piece played a crucial part during the Indigo revolt of 1859 in Bengal.

⁵⁴ Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath* had become synonymous to India freedom struggle. The novel was proscribed by the Colonial rule.

Chandra Chattopadhyay⁵⁵, D.L.Roy⁵⁶ and Nabin Chandra Sen⁵⁷. However, what set him apart was his choice of language. His unusually forceful expression with a mix of local day to day language made him closer to the masses, made him look ‘raw’ and ‘rebel’. Nazrul’s thoughts were not different; his way of conveying them was different.

A year behind the bars made Nazrul even more famous amongst his contemporaries. Nazrul was initially kept at the Alipore Central jail, Kolkata. Later he was shifted to Hughli jail where he undertook a hunger strike for more than a month (April – May 1923), demanding equal status for Indian prisoners. The thirty-nine days long strike, Nazrul gave up only when Biraja Sundari Devi⁵⁸ approached him. The poet’s hunger strike had sent ripples of concern down the literary and non-literary quarters of the Bengali society. Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and C.R. Das were amongst the first few to send Nazrul notes to give up his hunger strike. Nazrul’s imprisonment had yet again made him a youth icon. Felicitations were carried out after his release from the jail in December 1923. One such felicitation took place at Behrampore Science College Hostel⁵⁹. He also attended a literary conference organized by *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad* in Medinipur, Feb 1924⁶⁰.

An artist usually has his reservation against where and in front of whom he wishes to perform. An artist exhibits his art in a gathering/function with choicest of audience.

⁵⁵ Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Pather Dabi*, unlike other novels which concerns about the suppressed women of the contemporary society, put forward the entire society encompassing both men and women as the poor victims of the monstrous colonial society. *Pather Dabi*, actually a secret society endeavoured to bring up a social revolution, thereby to free India from the British shackles.

⁵⁶ Dwijendra Lal Roy, popularly known as D.L. Roy (19 July 1863 – 17 May 1913), was a Bengali poet, playwright, and musician.

⁵⁷ Nabin Chandra Sen (1847 – 1909), was a Bengali poet and writer, often considered as one of the greatest poets prior to the arrival of Rabindranath Tagore.

⁵⁸ Biraja Sundari Devi was Kazi Nazrul Islam’s would be wife’s aunt. Nazrul’s affection and respect for her was more than his own mother. As mentioned earlier, Nazrul had estranged his ties with his family in Churulua long back.

⁵⁹ Rafiqul Islam, op.cit, p. 115.

⁶⁰ Ibid

Though it is not always possible for an artist to have a say over his audience but he surely has the last word over either accepting or rejecting an invitation. Nazrul, on the contrary, had no such air about his stature. That is probably why Nazrul's image was that of a common man, a revolutionary, who loved to attend any function organized by any organization. No matter how big or small the crowd Nazrul would attend and perform in full zest. Nazrul travelled all across Bengal, to attend functions, ceremonies, gatherings, felicitations, meetings and strikes. Being a poet he could have happily limited himself to pen and paper, publishing his writings and articles in various journals, magazines and newspapers. But he chose to extend himself much beyond just his writing.

While busy with his literary career and garnering much unwanted colonial attention, Nazrul received an invitation from *Deshobondhu*⁶¹ (a friend of the nation) C.R. Das. This invitation was to join C.R.Das in his movement against the corrupt *mohanto* (head priest) of Tarakeshwar temple. Before getting into the details of the Tarakeshwar Satyagraha and Nazrul's involvement in it, we shall first briefly look at the relationship see the equation shared between C.R.Das and Nazrul. Nazrul had personal ties with C.R.Das and his family. But professionally these two came in touch during the 'Hindu-Muslim Pact' campaign launched by C.R.Das. The signing of the Pact in December 1923 was one of the most important political events in Bengal during that year. Negotiations had begun in September and were completed on December 9 at the home of Khuda Baksh, a Punjabi merchant in central Calcutta⁶². In essence the Pact was the final attempt by C.R.Das to salvage Muslim support for the local Congress- backed Swaraj Party which was to contest the forthcoming provincial and Corporation elections⁶³. The Pact contained two sets of provisions. The first conceded the Muslims of Bengal a majority share in the administration and government of the province after Swaraj, whilst the second provided for a voluntary banning of Hindu music before mosques, the freedom of Muslims to perform Korbani, and the promise of greater percentage of Muslim employees in a Swarajist

⁶¹ Chittaranjan Das was popularly known as *Deshobondhu*.

⁶² Kenneth McPherson, *The Muslim Microcosm: Calcutta, 1918 to 1935*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1974, p. 76.

⁶³ Ibid

controlled Corporation⁶⁴. The Pact was certainly generous in its concessions: Muslim upper class and middle class aspirations were considered while some of the grievances of the lower class Muslim in Calcutta were met, at least on paper. The Muslim reaction was immediate and favourable⁶⁵. However, the mood of rapprochement did not last long.

Moving on to the Tarakeshwar temple Satyagraha which arose out of the merchants' unwarranted activities in the famous Shiva temple and a pilgrimage site⁶⁶. This Shaivite temple was built in the early eighteenth century and by the turn of the century had become immensely popular. The temple was managed by the head priest or the *mohanto* and his associates. The popularity of the shrine brought in a lot of wealth for the priests, especially the *mohanto*. And as the age old cliché goes, in-flow of money spoilt the temple environment. The *mohanto* however took to corruption and adultery. An episode that gained much attention in the newspapers was the legendary *mohanto*-Elokeshi episode. Elokeshi, who was married to Nabin, was seduced by the *mohanto*. When Nabin failed to get her back, he murdered her⁶⁷. Though the public sentiment was in favour of Nabin he was given rigorous imprisonment and deported to Andaman. The *mohanto* on the other hand was given only three years of imprisonment. As soon as he was released from the jail, he resumed the charge of the *mohanto* once again. This by no means was acceptable to the public. The villagers urged C.R.Das to start a Satyagraha against the *mohanto* in their village⁶⁸.

C.R.Das, by then a renowned political leader, had a huge fan following in Bengal. He accepted the invitation and began his Satyagraha in Hughli. The movement went on for four months (June-Oct 1924). C.R.Das involved the Congress party in the

⁶⁴Kenneth McPherson, op.cit, p. 76.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Sudhir Kumar Mitra, *Hughli Jelar Itihas o Bangosamaj*, 2nd edn, 3 vols, Mitrani Prakashana, Kolkata, 1962-8.

⁶⁷ Ibid. Vol.2, pp. 1109-30.

⁶⁸Buddhadev Bhattacharyya, *Satyagrahas in Bengal*, Minerva Associates, Kolkata, 1977, pp. 81-118.

movement and encouraged many young volunteers to join the same⁶⁹. The movement was carried out on a large scale. C.R.Das invited Nazrul to join the movement. Nazrul willingly accepted the invitation and joined Das in the Satyagraha. Nazrul composed '*Mohantor maha-anter gaan*'⁷⁰ on this occasion. Nazrul's association with C.R.Das came to end with the untimely demise of Das in 1925. With his death, the bridge between the two communities ended, the Hindu-Muslim pact also crumbled.

After Das' death, the ideologically restless poet almost immediately became a member of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee. One of the members of this Committee was Hemanta Kumar Sarkar. Nazrul gradually grew closer to him. Hemanta's interest lay with the cause of the toiling masses, especially the peasantry. In no time, Hemanta Sarkar along with Qutubuddin Ahmad and Shamsuddin Hussain decided to form a new wing within the INC. Nazrul also readily joined the group. In November 1925, they came up with the 'Labour Swaraj Party of the Indian National Congress'⁷¹. Within a month's time, December 1925, the party's weekly *Langol* (plough) came into publication. Nazrul was *Langol*'s editor-in-chief⁷². We shall get into the details of the themes and subject Nazrul wrote about in *Langol* in the next chapter. *Langol* remained in circulation for only 15 weeks⁷³ and then was replaced by *Ganobani* (Voice of the People)⁷⁴. *Ganobani* was however not the mouth-piece of Labour Swaraj Party; instead it was the organ for the newly formed Bengal Peasants' and Workers' Party. Just the way *Ganobani* replaced *Langol*, similarly, Bengal Peasants' and Workers' Party⁷⁵ replaced the Labour Swaraj Party. The same group of people formed the new party with the new political weekly. Nazrul remained the

⁶⁹ Buddhadev Bhattacharyya, op.cit, pp. 81-118

⁷⁰Kazi Nazrul Islam, 'Mohantor Maha-anter gaan', NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, Vol.3, p. 110.

⁷¹ Muzaffar Ahmed, op.cit. pp.184-5

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Last edition of *Langol* came out on 15th April 1926. See *Langol*, Sp Edition, 15th April 1926. Thereafter *Ganobani*'s first edition carried the message on its header that it has integrated the defunct *Langol*.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Bengal Peasants' and Workers' Party was later known as the Workers' and Peasants' Party.

member of the executive committee and also regularly contributed to *Ganobani*. The Workers' and Peasants' Party was among the first initiatives of communists in various parts of India and it is significant that Nazrul was closely associated with it from the beginning⁷⁶.

Economic equality was not the only concern for Nazrul, as much on his agenda was communal harmony. Nazrul's personal choices also indicated his stand on the question of Hindu-Muslim relationship⁷⁷. His attempt to bridge the gap between the two communities increased manifold with the outbreak of communal riots in 1926⁷⁸. Unity between the two major religious communities (Hindu and Muslim) was what Nazrul constantly advocated. According to him, if both Hindus and Muslims came together then the nation would be a better place to live. He also warned the people about the dangers of communal divides and the impact it would have over their future. However, Nazrul believed that merely speaking of human unity did not ipso-facto lead to political liberation. In other words, man had to be liberated from culturally and synthetically constructed walls of gender, class, race, religion, ethnicity, and nationality. Liberation, in other words had to be a meaningful and responsive transformation in social life. This called for changing both people and institutions.

Nazrul's poetry reveals a profound understanding of how one may go about pursuing and nurturing a religious identity while preserving a sense of mutual respect and sharing even outside it. He tried to demonstrate how our personal and human identities were in fact a fulfilment of the highest values which all great religions had emphasized. His primary motive was to make his readers recognize that an individual could not be free if 'others' remained unfree or even secure.

Nazrul and his political commitments grew further with his decision to contest elections in 1926. From attending Provincial Congress Conferences to campaigning

⁷⁶Aditya Mukherjee, "The Workers and Peasants Parties - 1926-30", in Bipan Chandra (ed), *The Indian Left: Critical Appraisals*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, 1983.

⁷⁷ We would discuss about Nazrul's personal choices and decisions in the next sub-section.

⁷⁸ Calcutta was shook by Hindu-Muslim riots in early April 1926. Communal riots stretched for more than a month. Nazrul was moved by this situation and wrote much about Hindu-Muslim solidarity.

for himself to singing for Hindu-Muslim solidarity, Nazrul did all. The election was scheduled in November 1926, for one of the two seats reserved for Muslims for Central Legislative Assembly in the predominantly Muslim division of Dhaka. Muzaffar Ahmad discouraged Nazrul many a times against contesting the election; however Nazrul was determined to do the same⁷⁹. The election was not based on adult franchise; rather only the landed aristocracy could vote – propertied Muslim males. This left out the masses from the voting population⁸⁰. In these circumstances Muzaffar Ahmad was sure of Nazrul's failure. However, Nazrul on the other hand, did not leave any stone unturned - rallied around, sang widely, managed a favorable *fatwa* from a *pir*⁸¹. He did every possible thing to assure his victory; but all in vain. At last Ahmad's prediction came true, Nazrul lost the election miserably. Apart from the sense of failure, this election also escalated his debt which he had incurred during the campaigning. All in all it was a massive blow to Nazrul's personal and professional life.

This phase in Nazrul's political activism was soon to come to an end. He gradually lost his interest in active politics and diverted himself more to the world of music and spiritual belief. Why there was this sudden change in his interest cannot be explained simplistically. A series of incidents culminated into this one big change in his life. First, Nazrul lost the election in 1926. As discussed earlier, Nazrul had high hopes and was confident about his decision to contest this election. But the result crushed all his hopes. Second, Nazrul's economic condition was deteriorating with each passing day. In this situation, anything that brought money in the family looked a better option for Nazrul and his family⁸². The Gramophone Company at this point acted as a knight in shining armor. The more songs Nazrul recorded the more money he got to run his family. Thus, this looked a viable option for him. In a letter to Rabindranath Tagore Nazrul expressed the confusion life brought to him, with some humour. Letter shows

⁷⁹ Muzaffar Ahmad, op.cit, p. 197-9

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Refer to Chapter-5 for the details of the *fatwa*.

⁸² More about Nazrul's family shall be discussed in the next sub-section.

that Nazrul takes to music not abandoning politics. The first two lines of the letter read⁸³ -

“Gurudeb, bohudin sreecharan darshan korini. Amar opor hoyto prasanna kavyalakkhi His Master’s Voice-r kukur-er bhoy amay tagya korechen bohudin. Kajei sahitye-r ashor theke ami praye swechha-nirbashon niyechi”.

(“Gurudeb, I have not seen you for long. It seems the goddess of literature has abandoned me maybe because she is scared of His Master’s Voice’s dog⁸⁴. That is why I, on my own wish, have left the literary path for now”).

The Poet and his Muse – Nargis, Pramila and Fazilatunnesa

The ‘rebel’ poet surely had a romantic side to his personality. His love lyrics, his love for nature and his joyful compositions for children are a pointer towards it.

Nazrul was considerably unlucky when it came to his first lady love. First half of 1921, when Nazrul was barely twenty one years old he fell in love for the first time. Nazrul had just started to write and had tasted his initial success with *Nabojug*. His name was being recommended in publishing houses, journals and news-papers. It took the poet some time to learn the tricks of the trade. In the mean time, there were few who genuinely wanted to support the budding poet⁸⁵ and there were some more who wanted to take advantage of this naïve man. One such opportunist man was Ali Akbar Khan, a publisher by profession. Akbar Khan lured⁸⁶ Nazrul to Daulatpur (a small village in East Bengal). Nazrul stayed in Daulatpur for almost three months (April-June 1921)⁸⁷. In these three months Nazrul grew closer to Akbar Khan’s family, especially to Nargis Asar Khanam. This growing closeness gave Akbar the scope to

⁸³ Letter to Rabindranath Tagore by Nazrul Islam, dated – 28.8.1935; Reproduced in NRS, Paschim Banga Academy, Kolkata, Vol. 6, p. 487

⁸⁴ His Master’s Voice had a logo with a dog on it. Read the note of sarcasm in this statement.

⁸⁵ Few people who wanted to help Nazrul were Muzaffar Ahmad, Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay and Pranatosh Chattopadhyay.

⁸⁶ I use the term ‘lure’ because Akbar Khan’s intention in getting Nazrul to Daulatpur was not straight. Akbar’s real motive became clear much later.

⁸⁷ Muzaffar Ahmad, op.cit, pp. 45 – 52. Muzaffar Ahmad has given the full account of Nazrul’s experience at Daulatpur.

get his niece married off to Nazrul. Nazrul too accepted the marriage proposal, Khanam was semi-literate but beautiful. Just before the marriage, in fact on the day of marriage, Nazrul chose to run away. Muzaffar Ahmad states that Nazrul got a hint of Akbar's real intentions just before marriage. Akbar's sole objective was to have Nazrul as their '*ghor-jamai*'⁸⁸. This union would give Akbar the exclusive right over Nazrul's compositions. Nazrul left the ceremony behind and ran away to Comilla (presently in East Bengal).

A new chapter began, and it began in Comilla. In Comilla, Nazrul took shelter at the Sengupta's house. Akbar Khan had introduced Nazrul to the Sengupta family. On their way to Daulatpur from Kolkata, Akbar Khan stayed over at the Sengupta's for a night. Three months later, now when Nazrul ran from Daulatpur he had only the Senguptas in mind. Luckily for Nazrul, the family readily gave shelter to the emotionally troubled poet⁸⁹. The Sengupta family seemed unusually relaxed about the social norms; being an unimaginably liberal family. Having faced social untouchability once before⁹⁰ Nazrul was quite taken aback by the warm reception of the Senguptas. The Sengupta family had three daughters – Pramila (13), Kamala (12) and Anjali (6). Nazrul was enchanted by the whole family – their love, affection and care had overwhelmed him. Nazrul had developed a special liking towards Pramila. Three years later Nazrul proposed marriage to Pramila. In these three years Nazrul frequently visited Comilla. As mentioned before, during Nazrul's imprisonment it was Pramila's aunt Biraja Devi who was successful in persuading him to give up his hunger strike.

'In the 1920s, Indian society, a partly-famous Muslim poet falls in love with a Hindu girl and decides to marry her' – this situation was conducive enough to ignite communal tension. If not communal tension, it would surely lead to sever his ties

⁸⁸ '*Ghar-jamai*' - a groom who stays at his in-laws' place permanently and remains financially dependent on them.

⁸⁹ Muzaffar Ahmad, op.cit, pp. 45 - 52

⁹⁰ Nazrul's first encounter with untouchability was at his school hostel where the Hindu boys refused to share room, table and bed with the Muslim boy. See Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay, op.cit, pp. 194-198.

between the two families. No matter how liberal the families were, they could have never let such a marriage happen. The age old religious divide seemed to have only one solution – either of them converting their religious identity. Nazrul rather bravely for his times ruled out this option. He remained a Muslim and she a Hindu. They both got married on 25th April 1924 in a quite ceremony with only a handful of friends.

Nazrul began his newly married life in Hughli (mid 1924), a little away from Kolkata. Why he shifted base from Kolkata to Hughli is not known⁹¹. He never had a steady flow of income and led his life in perpetual poverty. His health had begun deteriorating. These days Nazrul was busy working for Hemanta Kumar Sarkar⁹². Late in 1925, Nazrul contracted Malaria. He practically never recovered from his illness. Lack of awareness about disease and health, a passion to work on and extreme poverty never gave Nazrul the chance to take a break from work and heal himself. He would become fine for a few days, work and travel around, but again would fall ill. They had their first child, Krishna Muhammad, in Hughli⁹³. But, unfortunately, the child died in his infancy. Krishna Muhammad – an unusual name, showed the poet's inherent inclination towards Hindu-Muslim syncretic ideas. At this juncture of his family condition and health, Nazrul chose to move out from Hughli. But where would he go next? - a question which soon found answer with Hemanta Kumar Sarkar's proposal. Hemanta Sarkar saw Nazrul's helplessness when it came to financial matters. Sarkar paid on behalf of Nazrul and cleared off all his debts and invited Nazrul to shift base to Krishnanagar⁹⁴. Nazrul readily accepted the offer and shifted to Krishnanagar with his family (early 1926). Nazrul was provided with all possible assistance to make his stay comfortable in the new town.

⁹¹ It is believed that during Nazrul's stay in the Hughli jail he had made acquaintance with some local Jugantar youths. And it was at their persuasion that Nazrul decided to settle in Hughli and work independently on the path of revolution.

⁹² Hemanta Kumar Sarkar (1897–1952) was an Indian philologist, author, biographer, editor, publisher, union leader, leader of the Indian freedom movement and an associate of Subhas Chandra Bose. He was a close friend and the first biographer of Subhas Chandra Bose, the co-founder of Labour Swaraj Party in Bengal along with Muzaffar Ahmed and Kazi Nazrul Islam.

⁹³ Nazrul's contemporary biographers have not given any dates for Krishna Muhammad's birth or death.

⁹⁴ Muzaffar Ahmad, op.cit. p. 186.

Apart from his political commitments Nazrul was always in demand for his on-the-spot compositions. One such composition was a *ghazal* which he wrote as a response to the request made by the owner of Parsi Theatre in Kolkata⁹⁵. The *ghazal* received great appreciation and opened a new dimension in the poet's life. Nazrul's creative life rose like a phoenix from the ashes. This was also the time when Nazrul's second son was born, 9th Sept 1926. He named him Arindam Khaled. The name was yet again symbolic of the poet's idea of Hindu-Muslim unity. Arindam or popularly known as Bulbul was Nazrul's life-line. New abode, new *ghazals*, a new family member – seemed like Nazrul's life had taken a new turn. The poet started concentrating more on music as it was generating money to sustain his family. Initially Nazrul used to sing his own songs, but he was not a gifted singer. He infused a lot of energy into the song but lacked melody. This problem too found a solution when *Bharat Barso* (journal, founded by poet-dramatist Dwijendra Lal Roy) published his *ghazals*. Nazrul named his first volume of ghazals after his son, *Bulbul* (Oct 1928) and dedicated it to Dwijendra Lal Roy's son Dilip Kumar Roy.

Later, Dilip Kumar Roy became the foremost singer and popularizer of Nazrul's ghazals. Nazrul's union with Dilip Kumar Roy did not continue for long as Dilip Roy left everything behind and joined Sir Aurobindo Ghosh in Pondicherry (end of 1928)⁹⁶. From being a Rabindra Sangeet (Tagore-songs) singer, Nazrul soon emerged as a major composer of patriotic and love songs also in the twenties prior to his *ghazal* days.

The year 1928, gave another gift to Nazrul. The poet had a new muse, Fazilatunnesa (1905-1975). In a letter to Motahar Hossain on 8th March, 1928⁹⁷, Nazrul said, "After my death, many-many conferences might be held; many of my poems might be read. Discussions over my articles might take place. Articles of praise and appreciation might be published after my name. A patriot, a self-abnegator, a brave and

⁹⁵ Pranatosh Chattopadhyay, op.cit, pp. 171 – 2.

⁹⁶ Dilip Kumar Roy, *Smriticharon*, Indian Associated Publishing Company, Kolkata, 1960, p. 503.

⁹⁷ Letter to Motahar Hussain, NRS, Paschim Banga Academy, Kolkata, Vol. 6, p.458

courageous, rebel – adjectives after adjectives might be added to my name. But none of these praises describes the person that I am. Dear friend, don't go to any of my condolence meetings. You know the 'real me'. The people know me as I have portrayed myself in the writings. You know the truth, the inside story of my life. So, dear friend, sit back at home and recall my personal experiences and you will find me by your side"⁹⁸. Nazrul writes this letter to Motahar Hossain after being rejected in love by Fazilatunnesa, graduate student in Dhaka University's mathematics department. Nazrul visited Dhaka and made new friends like Motahar Hossain who introduced him to Fazilatunnesa. Nazrul was impressed by the young woman's beauty and intelligence and made many attempts to impress her. But nothing was reciprocated from Fazilatunnesa's side. Nazrul was deeply hurt by this and expressed an aspect of his personality which was hidden from the world in the letters to Motahar Hossain. The lines quoted above are only a few lines from one of the eight letters that Nazrul wrote to Motahar Hossain.

In his poetic career Nazrul felt complete by this phase of tragedy in his life. He found himself in the same league as Shelley and Keats⁹⁹. By 'complete' Nazrul tried to mean the emotions which made a poet's life worth living and expressing. In another letter to Motahar Hossain, 4th April 1928, Nazrul wrote, "Rabindranath Tagore once told me that I am still unstable in my poetic life. But this would turn into stability and I shall attain more depth in my expression only when tragedy will knock my door. Dear Motahar, that tragedy has hit my life now"¹⁰⁰. Nazrul expressed his sense of completeness once he returned from Dhaka after being rejected by Fazilatunnesa. Hence, one could say that to an extent Nazrul searched for this love and tragedy in his life. Thus, the rebel side of Nazrul is only one side of the coin. When too immersed in love and melancholy, Nazrul did not display the 'rebel' side of his personality. He looked like just another poet who expressed the creative and imaginative side of his

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Letter to Motahar Hossain, NRS, Vol. 6, p.464. Nazrul equated himself with Shelly and Keats as both these poets too underwent a lot of emotional turmoil in their personal lives. And according to Nazrul, only this emotional bankruptcy could make a poet reach the epitome of his poetic expression. Just the way tragedies had struck the lives of Shelley and Keats.

¹⁰⁰ Letter to Motahar Hossain, op.cit

poetic style. His religious thoughts also made him look calm and composed, quite different from his political writings. In my opinion, Nazrul's religious ideology had two sides to it. One- it showed the calmer side of his personality, where he submitted himself to the almighty. Second- the 'rebel' side of his nature where he did not comply with religious dogmatism. From Krishnanagar, Nazrul moved to Kolkata by the end of 1928. The year marked the zenith of Nazrul's popularity. For some time he had been receiving public welcome wherever he went in Bengal. In the later months of 1928, Nazrul visited Sylhet, Rangpur, and Rajshahi (all in east Bengal) and was received enthusiastically.

All throughout the 1920s Nazrul remained extremely active – both culturally and politically. From Dhumketu and his imprisonment to C.R Das and Muzaffar Ahmad to contesting elections and finally taking his first steps in the world of music – Nazrul remained highly active.

Music and Divinity in the Poet's Life -

In spite of his tremendous popularity as a singer the 'rebel' poet was carefully avoided by the British-owned Gramophone Company¹⁰¹. Harendra Dutta revisited and voiced a song originally sung by Nazrul, however fearing that the British influence on the recording company (His Master's Voice) would not authorize the recording, he kept Nazrul's name out of the recording label¹⁰². However, the situation dramatically changed by 1928 when, with the *ghazal* boom, Nazrul's popularity soared higher than ever. Demands for records of his songs were raised to the Company from different quarters, and they immediately realized that any further neglect of one of the most popular poet in the country would mean a considerable financial loss and greater public displeasure. In 1928 the Company, suddenly aware of the previous recording, promptly paid the entire arrears in royalties due to the poet with a request for more recordings of his songs¹⁰³.

¹⁰¹Shahabuddin Ahmed, "Kazi Nazrul Islam", *The Daily Star*, Dhaka, May 25, 1999, p.3

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³Muzaffar Ahmad, op.cit. p. 206

Nazrul was not fortunate enough to savour this great moment of success in his life. The unfortunate death of his beloved son Bulbul in early May, 1930 intervened. Although Nazrul by now had a third son Sabyasachi (born in 1929) and fourth son Aniruddha (born in 1930), his attachment to Bulbul was exceptionally strong¹⁰⁴. Music, which Nazrul had already picked up before, eventually proved to be an excellent medium of cultivating his new interest in spiritualism. Nazrul, in the 1930's was presented with multiple career opportunities like composing music, music director, singer, recording artist with gramophone companies. Acting in films and theatre were also an option for him. Nazrul's financial stability and conditions improved owing to his association with the gramophone companies. The recording companies were initially apprehensive of signing a contract with Nazrul because of the British authority which would prohibit the recording of his songs citing political reasons. Even Nazrul's followers were subjected to enquiry. The recording companies however, upon realising Nazrul's immense popularity and mass appeal, finally gave in and started signing him.

After he established connections with the Gramophone Company, Nazrul, as trainer of artistes, got in touch with seniors like Ustad Jamiruddin Khan (d.1939) who was also a trainer for the Company¹⁰⁵. Khan proved to be an able guru for Nazrul and the disciple was to dedicate a volume of songs entitled 'Bono-giti' (Songs of the Forest) to his guru in 1932. After Khan's retirement, Nazrul stepped into the shoes of his teacher as trainer and composer for the Company¹⁰⁶. After 1931, he also entered the world of theatre and films subsequently joined the Kolkata Radio. Nazrul also introduced a new genre of songs called 'Islami Gan' (Islamic Songs) to Bengal. These, thoroughly popularized through the pleasant voice of the gifted singer, Abbasuddin Ahmad, had a tremendously liberalizing and inspirational effect on the tradition bound, society of the Bengali Muslims. They instantly broke the puritanical

¹⁰⁴ Priti Kumar Mitra, op.cit. p.86.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ahmad, op.cit. p. 204.

spell of the Muslim priests, and soon a wide cross-section of Bengali Muslims found their way into the realm of music¹⁰⁷.

The Last Journey¹⁰⁸ -

Tragically, the poet was smitten with a second blow in his personal life: his wife Pramila was struck down with paralysis. Financial crisis was re-emerging, due to Pramila's medical expenses. Nazrul was said to have mortgaged his gramophone records and literary works for a mere sum of four thousand rupees¹⁰⁹. No treatment worked on Pramila and she became permanently bedridden. Amidst this all-round misfortune at home, Nazrul was himself affected by an incurable brain ailment in July 1942. Soon thereafter, he lost his speech permanently and his ability to think normally. For the next thirty-four years Nazrul lived only biologically, with a life without speech and mind.

It was 9th July 1942, Nazrul was at Calcutta Radio Station. He had a ten minute story telling programme on Air that day. Ten minutes were not over by then, but Nazrul had stopped reading the story. Nazrul could not speak a word. Nazrul's friend at the Radio station realized the gravity of the matter and took him home. For a week's time, Nazrul was treated by their house-physician Dr. D.D. Sarkar¹¹⁰. There was no improvement in his condition. A man who had lost his speech and was partly paralytic, why was he being treated at home? Well, Nazrul was under debt and had lost all his personal possession in getting his ailing wife treated. His sons Kazi Sabyasachi and Kazi Aniruddha were twelve and ten years old, respectively. For almost a decade after the tragic incident, no special attention was paid to Nazrul's condition. AK Fazlul Haq and Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee¹¹¹ had arranged Nazrul's treatment at Madhupur under a homeopathic doctor, Dr. Sarkar. Nazrul

¹⁰⁷ More details to be discussed in Chapter-4.

¹⁰⁸ See Appendix 1 – 11 for the details of Medical Reports.

¹⁰⁹ Shahabuddin Ahmed, "Kazi Nazrul Islam", *The Daily Star*, Dhaka, May 25, 1999, p.4

¹¹⁰ Rafiqul Islam, *Nojrul Jiboni*, Department of Bangla-Dhaka University Press, Dhaka, 1972, p.465.

¹¹¹ Shyama Prasad Mukherjee (6 July 1901 – 23 June 1953) was of the most prominent politicians in Jawarharlal Nehru's cabinet.

stayed there for two months and got back to Kolkata, September 1942, without any improvement in his condition.

Second attempt was made by Rabindranath Tagore's physician Kabiraj Bimalanand Tarkatirth. Even he failed to bring any positive change in the poet's health. Things were deteriorating for Nazrul; he had begun to lose his mental balance. Third attempt was made by sending the poet to Lumbini Park Mental Clinic in October 1942, Calcutta. His four months stay at the mental hospital did not bring any improvement and January 1943 he was brought back home. To help the financially distressed family out a Nazrul Assistance Committee was formed – Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee as President and treasurer, Sajanikanta Das and Zulfiqar Haider as Joint Secretaries and Sir A.F Rahman, Tarashankar Bandhyopadhyay, Humayun Kabir, Gopal Haldar and Satyendranath Mazumdar as members¹¹². This committee paid the poet's family an amount of rupees two hundred for the next five months¹¹³. Private and government aides carried on irregularly till about 1952. These arrangements were on and off and nothing concrete was in shape.

In the mean time, India got its independence on 15th August 1947. Partition came along with it. Nazrul was completely unaware of what went on outside the walls of his house. Nazrul and his family stayed back in West Bengal. After partition, the East Pakistan Literary Council appealed to the government to provide Nazrul Islam a thousand rupee grant. With the efforts of Habibullah Bahar, a prominent minister in East Pakistan, the government on 1st April 1948 granted Nazrul a monthly allowance of one hundred and fifty rupees¹¹⁴. However, as Nazrul lived in Kolkata, his family did not receive the grant for two years due to bureaucratic tangles. Finally Nazrul was provided the money through the Comilla Banking Corporation and later through the Pakistan Deputy High Commission in Kolkata¹¹⁵.

¹¹² Rafiqul Islam, *Nojrul Jiboni*, p. 465.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 366.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

On 27th June 1952, the ‘Cure Nazrul Committee’ was formed with Kazi Abdul Wadud as the General Secretary. The committee initially sent Nazrul and his wife to Ranchi Mental Hospital in July 1952. With no signs of improvement Nazrul was sent back to Calcutta after his four months stay at Ranchi Hospital. Next, the Committee arranged to send Nazrul, his wife and son Aniruddha to London. They were sent off in a ship. July 1953, Nazrul reached London and a medical board was set up to treat the poet. The board of doctors failed to recover Nazrul’s deteriorating condition. Dr. Russell Brain¹¹⁶ and Dr. A.E. Betton could arrive to a conclusion and Nazrul was sent to Vienna from there. In Vienna, Nazrul was placed under Dr. Hans Hoff. Dr. Hoff was of the opinion that Nazrul suffered from Picks Disease and there was no possibility of recovery¹¹⁷. By December 1953, Nazrul was sent back to his home in Calcutta. Promilla was bedridden since 1939. Finally at the age of 54, 30th June 1962 she breathed her last. Promilla was buried in Churulia (Nazrul’s ancestral village). In 1972, Nazrul was sent to Dhaka to celebrate his birth anniversary. Nazrul remained in Dhaka till he breathed his last in 1976.

The Literary Career of Nazrul – A Brief Sketch

The Shiarsol Raj High School left deep imprints on Nazrul, who later mentioned it in his first published piece, a short story entitled ‘Baundeler Atmukahini’ (Autobiography of a Vagabond), published in the monthly, *Saogat*, in May 1919¹¹⁸. The most obvious of the impact was the *Dhumketu* (The Comet), Nazrul’s biweekly paper that was regarded by the *Jugantar* group as their own organ¹¹⁹. Nazrul’s literary career thus reflects a mix of his socio-political ideologies. In the early days however, Nazrul’s writings reflect more of his political ideology rather than the social.

Nazrul had come back from the army with far more fervent patriotism. He and Muzaffar Ahmad decided to start a Bengali daily as the first step towards a political

¹¹⁶ See Appendix no. 1-5.

¹¹⁷ See Appendix no. 5-11.

¹¹⁸ Rafiqul Islam, *Nojrul Jiboni*, p. 465.

¹¹⁹ Muzaffar Ahmed, *op.cit.*, p. 24.

career for themselves¹²⁰. They started the evening daily, *Nabojug* (1920). This marked the beginning of Nazrul's literary career. Nazrul wrote many articles during this period like 'Bingsho Shatabdi'(Twentieth Century), 'Gechhe Desh Dukho Nai, Abar Tora Manus Ho' [Regain your manliness even though this country is lost to us], 'Kala Admike Guli Mara'¹²¹ (To Shoot at the Black Man). The articles in *Nabojug* dealt mostly with anti- imperialistic thoughts. The most provocative of Nazrul's writings in *Nabojug* was 'Muhajirin Hotyar Jonyo Dayi Ke?' (Who was responsible for the massacre of Muhajirs?) – that dealt with the tragic event of British soldiers opening fire on Muslim volunteers who were crossing into Afghanistan to settle down there in order to avoid British tyranny in India¹²².

The Non-cooperation movement launched by Gandhi inspired Nazrul to turn to political reality more than anything else. However, the idea of mass agitation inspired by the Non-cooperation movement was soon superseded by an intense desire for armed rebellion against imperialism. The immediate stimulus for this radical change in Nazrul came from the nationalist rebellion in Turkey under the military leadership of the modernist Mustafa Kamal Pasha (1881-1938). Nazrul was tremendously inspired by Kamal's armed uprising for national emancipation and hailed the Turkish war of liberation in a dramatic poem, 'Ranobheri' (War Trumpet), in August 1921. A month later Nazrul came up with one of his greatest compositions, 'Kamal Pasha'. In these poems we could see Nazrul dissenting from mainstream Indian Muslim opinion that had begun the Khilafat movement in favour of the Sultan who had held the title of Khalifah or the supreme leader of Islam (the response of the Islamic orthodoxy to the Rebel Poet's disobedience will be discussed in the fourth chapter). The crisis of the time unwittingly crept into his poetry only to energize it to an unprecedented dynamism and heroism. It is by this time that he also produced a series of politically provocative poems like 'Bidrohi', 'Prolayollas', 'Agnibina' (collection of poems) which earned him the epithet of 'Bidrohi Kobi' par excellence. The most popular of Nazrul's poems, '*Bidrohi*', was published in January 1922. In August 1922, Nazrul

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

¹²¹ *Kala Admike Guli Mara*, NRS, Paschim Banga Academy, Kolkata, Vol.1, p.444

¹²² *Muhajirin Hotyar Jonyo Dayi Ke?*, NRS, Paschim Banga Academy, Kolkata, Vol.1, pp. 818-19.

started his biweekly paper called *Dhumketu*. Right from the moment of its first appearance, *Dhumketu* instantly rose to tremendous popularity and would soon beat the circulation of all other vernacular papers in Kolkata¹²³.

The government repeatedly banned his verses. Nazrul's poem, "*Bisher Banshi* (the Poison Flute)" was proscribed from being circulated, stating that "The publication was of most objectionable nature, the writer revealing in it revolutionary sentiment and inciting young men to rebellion and law breaking"¹²⁴. August 1930, Nazrul's poem "*Proloyshikha* (flame of destruction)" was also banned and right before the year ended he was imprisoned alleging sedition¹²⁵. His collected works the "Sanchita" was proscribed and withdrawn from the stands seven years after it was published (1928) for including the poems titled "Bidrohi", "Kandari Hunsiyar" and "Dhibarder Gan" which were thought to be treasonable¹²⁶. The obvious motive behind the sudden suppression of Nazrul and his works was that these poems grew to be a lamp of motivation and inspiration for the masses and were even being sung as marching songs by the radical terrorists of Bengal. These acts of suppression did not just end there, and as late as in 1941, a classified file of government of Bengal noted that Nazrul's book *Yugavani* (1922), "breathes bitter racial hatred directed mainly against the British, preaches revolt against the existing administration in the country and abuses in very strong language 'The Slave-Minded' Indians who uphold the administration"¹²⁷.

As mentioned above, Nazrul increasingly wrote about the peasants and the workers and was successful in bringing up the question of workers' discontent in the

¹²³ Basudha Chakrobarty, *Kazi Nazrul Islam*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1968, p. 91.

¹²⁴ Notes of Bengal Government's Confidential Files (Home) Dept. on Bisher Banshi; Government of Bengal – Office of the Commissioner of Police, Calcutta, Detective Department, 1927-1930. Also reproduced in Sisir Kar, *Nisiddho Nojrul*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 1983

¹²⁵ Partha Sarthi Gupta, "Music and Political Consciousness: A Critical Study of D.L.Roy and Nazrul Islam", *Occasional Papers on History and Society*, NMML, New Delhi, 1988, p. 42.

¹²⁶ Arun Kumar Basu, *Nazrul Jivani*, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2000.

¹²⁷ Sisir Kar, op.cit. p.22.

forefront¹²⁸. The party's organ, the (weekly) *Langol* (the Plough), started publication with Nazrul Islam as the chief editor. The ultimate demands it mentioned were: widespread nationalization of all large-scale industrial sector and better benefits to the local village governments¹²⁹. With *Langol* as a medium, Nazrul came out with poems like, 'Samyo' (Equality), 'Barangana' (Prostitutes), 'Manus' (Man), 'Ishwar' (God), 'Kuli Mojur' (Coolies and Labourers), and 'Sarbohara' (Have-nots). Nazrul's 'Jater Bajjati' (Wickedness of Caste) and 'Chhuntmargo' (an editorial in daily *Nobojug*, 1920) reflected his criticism of the prevailing caste system in society. All of these writings from Nazrul echoed his social ideology, be it on issues concerning women or the issues concerning lower classes of the society. Nazrul's poems delved into the liberty and power of a woman's free mind and the ability to undertake varied responsibility in society. His idea of gender equality strongly resonated in his poetic work 'Nari' (Woman). *Langol* survived only for fifteen weeks and few months later *Ganobani* (People's Voice) became the organ of the party.

Throughout his life Nazrul remained a spokesman for the Hindu-Muslim political and socio-cultural synthesis. A question to be raised here is whether we could relate Nazrul's Hindu-Muslim cultural synthesis to the long existing syncretistic tradition in rural Bengal? Can it be traced back to the prevalent punthi culture amongst the rural Bengali Muslims which took a back seat in the post reformist and revivalist period?

There was yet another completely different side of Nazrul's literary world – the expression of love and beauty. In this world, Nazrul wasn't the fighter or the rebel in midst of a raging war, but a melancholic lover who's words were fetched from the depths of an ocean of contemplation. Nazrul penned words which would etch themselves in the readers' minds, on the deepest human emotion of all; love. He also formed a world where the reader would instantly bond with the splendor of the nature through his words. He showed us all the probable shades of life around. Vivid descriptions of nature were an essential part of his writing. In Nazrul's parallel world of love, his poetry reflected his deep sentiments and he is found to be longing, beseeching and almost being effeminate. He is distressed, tormented by self-pity, and

¹²⁸ Rafiqul Islam, *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Jibon o Kobita*, p.64.

¹²⁹ Pranatosh Chattopadhyay, *Kaji Nojrul*, p. 117.

has somehow found solace in his grief. He is constantly burdened by a feeling of severance. The unvoiced tree, the infinite sky, the mighty yet gracious river, the ever guiding moonlight, and the timid village girl were some of the characters that were most prominent in his love-poetry.

As a love-poet Nazrul followed a two way process. On the one hand he followed the traditional pattern of concepts and modes of expression. On the other, he drifted away a little and expressed his love in the form of expressing the love for the body. While singing of love he linked himself with the vast and rich custom of love poetry in Bengali language. He associated himself with history, and yet retained his individualism.

The beloved in Nazrul's poetry was always a heartless one. She was prone to rejection and difficult to please. Yet she was described as a creature of flesh and blood with an emotional heart. Nazrul Islam did not believe in disembodied love as many others in Bengali literature did. It is here that Nazrul stands different and retains his individuality. For example *Dolan Chapa*¹³⁰ (1923) is a collection of poems on love and beauty. 'Pujarini'¹³¹ (Female Worshipper), is the longest of the poems in the book. The poem gives an exposition of the poet's concept of love. The lover has known the beloved from time immemorial. He has been passing through a cycle of reincarnations and has always loved the priestess (his beloved). Their love lived beyond time. The girl belonged to the tradition of Bengali love poetry. Yet the poet has known her distinctly and physically:

“That voice, that dove-bewailing melody,
Those eyes, that force,
That eye-brow, forehead, chin,
That matchless beauty of yours,
That ambling swan-defeating dance of your gait,
I know, I know all”¹³²

¹³⁰ *Dolan Chapa*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 1, pp.45-88

¹³¹ *Pujarini*, it was first written during Nazrul's stay in jail. Later was published in the book *Dolan Chapa*; both were in the same year of 1923. NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p. 66. Translated by Abdul Hakim.

¹³² *Ibid.*

Together, they have had moments of impossible ecstasy followed by periods of unbearable separation. Love brought joy, but it also brought pangs of sorrow. In ‘Chakrabak’ (1929)¹³³, we get to see an expression of this separation. For example –

“He had got her as his life’s abiding mate
 On some happy day on this river’s bank
 In some forgotten previous birth.
 Then came the unending night of separation,
 A feather of that memory still lies
 Near his aching heart.
 The day has passed but the night seems endless:
 The far-off bank of the river
 Is out of sight.
 A barrier stands between this bank
 and that through the ages:
 she is on the other bank: she looks
 at the endless sea and weeps”¹³⁴

‘Chakrabak’ is also a collection of poems on love and nature. But it is difficult to separate his love-poems from his poems of nature, because while writing on love he used nature as imagery and in nature he found his beloved. A few lines from *Vatayan Pashe Gubak Tarur Shari* (1929) (Betel nut trees besides my Window):-

“In your leaves I have seen her black eye-lashes,
 Your body is as hers;
 And in your trilling, whistling noise,
 There is her shy voice;
 From your branches hangs, her saree,
 And your breeze is as intimately dear
 As the touch of her finger”¹³⁵

The parallel world of Nazrul’s poetry draw a part of its importance not only because of the way it has been composed but also because of the fact that these love poems have been composed by a ‘rebel’ poet. One cannot also deny the fact that between the radical poet and the quiet one devoted to nature and love there lays a concord which

¹³³ *Chakrabak*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.3, p. 175. Translated by Abdul Hakim

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ *Vatayan Pashe Gubak Tarur Shari*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.3, p. 141. Translated by Basuddha Chakrabarty.

cannot be overlooked. Indeed to overlook the liaison between the “aggressive rebel” and the “softer lover” would be to misconstrue him as a human being, a poet, a thinker, a political activist and a social worker. Nazrul had always been a fond admirer of beauty wanted everyone’s lives to be full of it. However watching life being deprived of its beauty he fought, fought against the forces that were responsible for the devastation of beauty. His dream was for life to be complete, however in reality, he found life to be wretchedly incomplete. His protest was an outcome of his love. If one had to look for anything like Nazrul Islam’s philosophy of life, it is here. The eternal quest of the Beautiful, whereas pain and sorrow is projected along the road of revolt against the evil that stalks the world.

Yet another facet of Nazrul’s creativity was the children’s literature. His primary purpose to write for the children was to produce light and fun literature, and to encourage them to understand the world and to accomplish prominence. In Nazrul’s literature for children, he actually perceived the world like a child does and looked at it from the perspective of a child and communicated in a tongue that a child would. One of Nazrul’s most notable poems was centered around a young hero in ‘Lichhu Chor’. This poem narrated the story of a child who went to steal a fruit from the neighbour’s garden. In the poem a child’s feelings of greed, fear, courage and his bravado have been treated with consummate skill. The moral lesson at the end comes inconspicuously but inevitably, like the beating that the guard had given the luckless thief.

Nazrul’s intention was to have the child’s mind free and encouraged thinking. When the daily Azad, a popular newspaper during the last days of the British rule in India, started a page for the children, Nazrul Islam’s message to the young readers of the page was characteristic:-

“Do consider the honour of martyrdom,
More glorious than slavery,
Consider the sword to be nobler than
The belt of the peon,
Do not pray to God for anything petty;
Bow not your head to anyone except God”

What Nazrul Islam wrote for the children confirms us in our belief that inside all his sound and fury there was a central core of innocence.

Chapter – 3

The Socio – Political Ideology of Kazi Nazrul Islam

“Bharat hobe Bharat-bashir,
Ei katha tao bolte bhoy
Shei booroder bolish Neta –
Tader katha-ey cholte-y hoye¹”

(“Those who are even afraid of uttering
The truth that
India must belong to the Indians
Do you care to respect those old men as your leaders”)

The ‘rebel’ side of Nazrul made its strong presence felt mostly in the poet’s anti-imperialist writings. The above quoted lines depict only one side of Nazrul’s political ideology. Before we start our discussion on the political ideology of Nazrul it is important for us to recapitulate the initial influences which shaped his political outlook. In the first place, as has been mentioned in the introductory chapter, it was while reading at the Shiarsol High school (1915) that Nazrul came very close to Nibaranchandra Ghatak and was greatly motivated by his concept of an armed struggle against the British Raj. Ghatak, a teacher of the school was an active member of a revolutionary secret society called ‘Jugantar’. These societies organized movements in Bengal against the British occupation by carrying armed attacks. Muzaffar Ahmad tells us that in later years Nazrul had made frank confessions of having been inspired with patriotic and revolutionary ideas of Nibaranchandra Ghatak².

Second influence was his stay at the army barracks from 1917 to 1920. Thirdly, the impact of the October revolution in Russia on Nazrul was also very deep and long-lasting. These three incidents made the base of Nazrul’s political understanding before he began his literary-political career. Gradually his political thoughts and ideas evolved with wider exposure to Indian politics.

*All translations from Bengali to English except when otherwise stated are mine

¹ *Bidroh Bani*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 1, p.128.

² Muzaffar Ahmad, *Kazi Nazrul Islam Smritikatha*, National Book Agency, Kolkata, 1965, p. 24.

In the previous chapter we have seen that initially (around 1919) Nazrul wrote on topics varying from love and nature to social destitution. He also wrote widely on themes related to the theology of Islam, of which examples have been earlier cited. Understandably these do not adequately reveal his political ideology. We get the first glimpse of this ideology only from the beginning of 1920s with his involvement in the Bengali newspaper, Nabojug.

Contemporary Political Thought in Bengal -

Nazrul's political ideology could be well understood only once we have an idea of the contemporary political thought in Bengal. At the dawn of the 20th century, India under Lord Curzon was witnessing a conservative phase of the oppressive rule of an imperialist power. The Indian response to this imperialist rule was varied and vigorous, the most radical being the Extremist movement for nation's liberation. After the outburst of nationalist struggle in the Swadeshi Movement (1905-8) under the Extremist guidance, as well as, the rise of terroristic activities, the British government appeared to change the policy of absolute rule and replace it with a more representative form of government³. Along with this progressive constitutionalism (which was never really progressive as Indians were to soon discover) the British government followed a policy of extreme repression. The Rowlatt Act of March 1919 and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 13th April 1919 are a few examples of the repressive measures taken by the British government.

From 1918 to 1921 the economic position of the poorer classes in Calcutta was desperate. Prices of basic commodities rose at a faster pace than wages and caused considerable labour unrest which peaked in 1921, and declined only towards the end of the year as prices began to fall. Jute mill workers suffered particularly during this period. Industry was in the grips of a depression for which wages and production were cut drastically. Although food prices fell late in 1921, the mill operative was faced with prices which had nearly doubled since 1914 compared with wages which had

³ Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal (1928-1934): the Politics of Protest*, OUP, New Delhi, 1987, p. 24

risen by only 50%⁴. Against this background of economic distress in the years following 1919 witnessed a sharp rise in political activity amongst the poorer classes of the Hindus and Muslims in Calcutta. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire that had precipitated the long-brewn crisis in Anglo-Muslim relations in India swept aside the loyalist leadership and gave birth to a joint Hindu-Muslim political movement in which Muslims of India sought to assert themselves and define their sense of identity.

Official files and private papers make abundantly clear that what alarmed the authorities, and made Non-Cooperation-Khilafat a movement vastly different from any other movements, was the large-scale adoption of such “*other-methods*” through popular initiative which were not directly initiated by Gandhi or the Calcutta leaders⁵. These initiatives ranged from sporadic *hat*-looting to a massive labour upsurge to jail breaks, resignations by policemen, non-payment of chaukidari and Union Board taxes, hostility to settlement operations, no-rent, and virtually total disavowal of British authority by peasants fired by a conviction that Gandhi Raj was coming or even already in existence⁶. Among all these forms, hat-looting was one most directly related to economic distress. The high price of cloth led to one such outbreak in the winter of 1917-18. In August-September 1919, a very sharp rise in price of rice (due to large scale exports from Bengal to feed other famine-stricken areas) was accompanied by 82 cases of hat-looting. Sumit Sarkar argues that from 1920 and for a part of 1921, the correspondence of the Governor of Bengal indicates that labour unrest evoked maximum official concern, followed by the Khilafat agitation and then the Gandhian Non-Cooperation movement⁷.

However, only economic conditions cannot account for these labour uprisings. Another contributory element was the growing awareness “that capitalists, millowners in particular, are making very large profits”, the impact of “world-wide political

⁴ D.G. Buchanan, *The Development of Capitalistic Enterprise in India*, Macmillan, New York, 1934, p. 117.

⁵ Sumit Sarkar, “The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Cooperation, 1905-22”, *Occasional Papers on History and Society*, Delhi, 1983, p.26.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.27

unrest...frequent reports of labour trouble in England and Europe,” and encouragement “by political agitators in India”⁸. Independent popular initiative was an important aspect of rebellious leadership of the Indian national movement. The Bengal Committee on Industrial Unrest listed 137 strikes in the province in the nine months starting from July 1920, while the annual administrative reports chronicled 150 strikes involving 265,000 workers in 1921 and 91 strikes involving 160,000 the following year⁹. Though most strikes took place on specific economic demands, other dimensions were not entirely absent. Racist insults and assaults at Jha Jha and Tundla provided immediate occasions for the two strikes of Railway workers in early 1922. 5000 Calcutta dock labourers went on strike on 14 December after an officer removed a man’s Gandhi cap. They demanded the instant release of C.R.Das and the right to raise slogans like “Gandhi Maharaj Ki Jai” while working on board¹⁰.

The Non-Cooperation struggle of 1921-22 also saw a unique conjuncture of political forces in Bengal. Workers and peasants, tribals and the bhadralok, Gandhians and terrorists, Muslims as well as Hindus knitted together their varied hopes and aspirations into a broadly common aim of immediate ‘Swaraj’. Swaraj, however, did not come in a year, the hopes that had informed the upsurge faded away and Gandhi’s withdrawal of the movement, following the killing of policemen in Chauri Chaura, led to widespread demoralization and stagnation. Two political alternatives replaced the phase of active struggle. A section of the Congress, the ‘No Changers’, retired to village bases and followed Gandhi’s programme of constructive rural and social work¹¹. Another section, the Swarajist Party, accepted Chittaranjan Das as their leader with a programme of Council entry and of hammering dyarchy from within. By the end of 1923, the joint Hindu-Muslim national political programme was in ruins¹².

⁸Ibid, p. 28

⁹ Report of Committee on Industrial Unrest (Calcutta, 1921), pp. 21; A Report on Administration of Bengal, 1920-1, pp.xi and 1921-22, pp.xii. Also reproduced in Sumit Sarkar, *ibid*, p. 28.

¹⁰ Sumit Sarkar, *ibid*, p. 31.

¹¹ Tanika Sarkar, *op.cit.* p.11.

¹² *Ibid*.

At one level this can be traced to several factors: violence at Chauri Chaura leading to the suspension of Non-Cooperation movement by Gandhi, and domestic developments in Turkey which abruptly resolved the Khilafat issue. But these are simply causes which explain the collapse of the immediate movement and they fail to explain why the rapprochement was unable to sustain itself by other than external political stimuli. Obviously, one answer is that the tensions between the communities formed for decades by the colonial state (the Partition of Bengal done with this motive) proved to be destroyed by the attempt at united struggle. Even at the height of the popular agitational movement a complete network of mutual suspicious and distrust had bedeviled communal relations¹³. In the daily life of the city two situations instigated by the communal tension in the city: one was the unresolved issue of *Korbani* or cow slaughter, the other was municipal reform. Both issues involved tangible and practical intervention into the community life in the city- a life that mumbled on beneath the glaze of political unity¹⁴.

The signing of the Das Pact in December 1923 in an effort to bring about Hindu – Muslim unity was the most important political event in Bengal during that year. Negotiations had begun in September and were completed on December 9 at the home of Khuda Baksh, a Punjabi merchant in central Calcutta¹⁵. In essence the Pact was the final attempt by C.R.Das to salvage Muslim support for the local Congress- backed Swaraj Party which was to contest the forthcoming provincial and corporation elections. The Pact contained two sets of provisions. The first conceded the Muslims of Bengal a majority share in the administration and government of the province after Swaraj, whilst the second provided for a voluntary banning of Hindu music before mosques, the freedom of Muslims to perform *Korbani*, and the promise of greater percentage of Muslim employees in a Swarajist controlled Corporation¹⁶. The Pact was certainly generous in its concessions: Muslim upper class and middle class aspirations were considered while some of the grievances of the lower class Muslim

¹³ Kenneth McPherson, *The Muslim Microcosm: Calcutta, 1918 to 1935*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1974, pp. 71-72.

¹⁴ Kenneth McPherson, op.cit. p.72.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 76

¹⁶ Ibid.

in Calcutta were met. The Muslim reaction was immediate and favourable¹⁷. However, the mood of rapprochement did not last long. The attempt to breach the gap between the two communities ended with the untimely death of C.R.Das in 1925.

The situation in Calcutta was complex. Popular Muslim opinion had certainly been favourably impressed by the Das Pact, but it solved none of the internal leadership problems of the Muslim community¹⁸. The Khilafatists were divided into a variety of factions mutually suspicious and wary of the frequent changes in the political activity by the Hindus. Some felt that the Congress had betrayed the Muslims by abandoning Non-Cooperation, others were cynical about the state of communal relations, some fervently supported the Das Pact whilst a growing number had wearied of the whole business and withdrew from all activity not immediately connected with communal interest. The result was that the Swaraj Party did poorly amongst the Muslim electorate.

The mood of the Muslim community in Calcutta during the early months of 1926 was one of increasing bitterness and frustration. The poorer classes of Muslims were subject to a multitude of conflicting appeals, while in the case of the middle and upper class Muslims who trusted the intentions of the Swaraj Party faith further undermined. In December 1925 the Government had announced its intention to reserve a larger share of appointments for Muslims – in fact to implement the Das Pact – but the scheme was bitterly opposed by the Hindus of all political parties¹⁹. All these agitated activities in Calcutta were concluded in an atmosphere of actual physical violence between Hindus and Muslims, on 2nd April 1926, began the first of a series of massive communal riots which disrupted the life of the city for the next six months.

Das's death created the need for a new provincial leader, for a cult figure. The choice lay between Subhash Chandra Bose and Jatindra Mohan Sengupta²⁰. In Bengal, Bose

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ David M. Laushey, *Bengal Terrorism & the Marxist Left: Aspect of Regional Nationalism in India (1905-1942)*, Firma K.L.Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1975.

¹⁹ Kenneth McPherson, op.cit. pp.89-90

²⁰ Tanika Sarkar, op.cit. pp.11-12

had arrived as a rebel, as the hero of the urban youth. His open adherence to the independence goal endeared him all the more to new groups of the revolutionary terrorists. He was seen as Bengal's own alternative, a challenge to the Gandhian leadership. Along with Jawaharlal Nehru, he constituted a radical pressure group within the Congress to challenge the Dominion Status goal. An extremely militant agitation grew up around the boycott of foreign cloth. Bose's style of campaign, however, did not meet with Gandhi's approval. Gandhi possibly disapproved of Bose's timing as he himself did not feel the time was ripe to launch a movement.

Subhash Chandra Bose was a follower of Nazrul Islam. Bose pointed out one unique quality of Nazrul's poetry – the fact of its being born out of the poet's personal experience of harsh realities of life such as war and imprisonment. He also noted the liveliness and vast impact of Nazrul's poetry on the people. Most significantly, Bose the great freedom fighter vowed: "When we shall go to the battlefield Nazrul's songs will be sung there. When we shall go to prison, we shall be singing his songs too".²¹

The Congress decision to boycott the all-white Simon Commission in 1927 provided a way out of the general dip in popular enthusiasm and the movement. The Congress organization now began to pick up. The release of terrorist prisoners from 1927 led to a reorganization. The former 'terrorist' now issued the mainstream national movement. A formidable youth and volunteer movement developed in Calcutta and mofussil towns, recovering their militancy through their anti-Simon Commission demonstrations and hartals. A powerful strike wave swept over the railway workers, the jute mill workers, the Corporation scavengers and the oil depot workers at Budge Budge²². Most of these movements were organized by the Workers' and Peasants' Party (WPP), an open front of the Communists. The WPP itself had strong local roots. The Bengal wing of the Party was originally established as a faction within the Congress by men who were Left oriented. As we saw earlier Nazrul was a key member of the Bengal WPP.

²¹Excerpts from Bose's speech (reproduced in Mustafa Nurul Islam, *Samokale Nojrul*, p. 135. 1928) - in an occasion where a felicitation of the people's poet was organized. It was attended by Dr. Prafulla Chandra Roy and many others.

²² Tanika Sarkar, op.cit. p. 12.

A Sramik-Proja-Swaraj Sampraday or a Labour Swaraj Party was set up at Bogra on 1 November 1925 with a provisional constitution and policy statement drawn up by Nazrul Islam. It proposed to work among peasants and workers while remaining within Congress and to send up representatives to the Legislative Assembly. It began to bring out a weekly mouthpiece, *Langol* (The Plough) from December 1925. The journal was financed by Qutbuddin Ahmad and edited by Nazrul. This Party soon merged itself with the newly formed Peasants' and Workers' Party at the All-Bengal Tenants' Conference at Krishnanagar on 6th February 1926. Later the party was known as the Workers' and Peasants' party. In the course of 1926, forty new members were recruited in the party, all of whom came from urban middle class. Of the committee members, two were Communists (Soumyendranath Tagore and Muzaffar Ahmad) and they were to set the tone in future. By 1928, the WPP had undoubtedly emerged as the dominant influence on the Calcutta industrial belt. The *Ganavani* (Voice of the People), edited by Muzaffar Ahmad replaced the *Langol* as the Party mouthpiece from August 1926. This journal was obviously meant for the intelligentsia.

The year 1928 marked a revival in nationalist agitations: anti-Simon Commission demonstrations, revival of revolutionary terrorism and new departures in Congress organizational activity. Civil Disobedience then initiated a shift in focus to rural areas and to new forms of struggle. The World Depression which, in Bengal, resulted in massive collapse in rice and jute prices provided a politically charged context. The hartal called on 3 February 1928 to protest against the arrival of the Simon Commission in Calcutta created a tradition of confrontation whose pattern would be repeated throughout the next two years. Radical Congressmen and former terrorists shared a range of idioms and expressions, which made up an internally consistent patriotic discourse for the urban middle class.²³ The pivotal point was youth power. Surendramohan Ghosh, a revolutionary terrorist leader from the *Jugantar*, described the youth as bold, self-sacrificing and freedom loving. Purna Chandra Das, another *Jugantar* leader, saw the future of the nation in the hands of the youth alone. The holy text of the Hindus, the *Gita* was frequently cited to evoke a death-defying mood among the youth. The language of such addresses was steeped in a kind of torrential,

²³ Tanika Sarkar, op.cit. p. 24.

fast-flowing emotionalism, an effusive, hyperbolic rhetoric²⁴. The rural Gandhians, the revolutionary terrorists, the peasant agitations, the working class movements and the Workers' and Peasants' Party, all made a comeback during this period. It should not be assumed that the revolutionary terrorist did not share any cordial relation with the Gandhians. Rather, on the contrary, these two groups did share a part of the ideological, emotional and organizational platform together²⁵.

The late 1920s constituted a major landmark in the growth of working class movements and organizations in Bengal, adding considerably to the general militancy of these years. The post-war economic boom was over and the mid-1920s saw the onset of an industrial depression. In jute the situation was further complicated by a substantial spurt of demand in 1925-9 which had encouraged the Indian Jute Millowners' Association (IJMA) to switch over to a policy of increased production. But the decision coincided with the fall in jute prices and a decline in the industry's profit rate²⁶. To cope with this drastic cut in demand almost 10% of the mills were sealed and a 15% wage cut was imposed²⁷. There were four major groups of strikes during 1928-9. In 1928, there were two rounds of strikes among scavengers of Calcutta Corporation which spread among the scavengers and sweepers of Howrah and some other district municipalities. Apart from certain basic economic demands the issues that brought workers into large-scale action almost always included a defence of the right to form unions. Union recognition was a major demand in the charter of the Corporation scavengers²⁸.

Thus, the political atmosphere between 1920-1930, a period when Nazrul engaged himself in political writings and political activism, in Bengal encompassed a wide ranging of movements involving not only the urban middle classes but also the workers and peasants. Placing Nazrul within this overall political background is a challenging task. A brief summary of the political events of this period in order here:

²⁴ Ibid, p. 23.

²⁵ Ibid. p.33.

²⁶ Tanika Sarkar, op.cit. p. 38.

²⁷ David M. Laushey, op.cit. p. 162.

²⁸ Tanika Sarkar, op.cit. p. 44

- The Indian National Congress, at this time the all-India party led by Gandhi was the chief organizer of the anti-imperialist agitations, the Non-cooperation, Khilafat, the Simon Boycott movements. The abrupt end of the Non-cooperation movement, however, had left many hopes unfulfilled.
- In 1922, a faction led by C. R. Das desired to make an entry into the government's legislative councils. And in 1923, they formed their own party, at first known as the congress-Khilafat Swaraj party and later only the Swarajya or Swaraj party.
- The Workers' and Peasants' Party marked the strong presence of the Leftist ideology in Bengal. Significant number of mass movements and labour uprisings rocked Calcutta between 1920-1930.
- The revolutionary groups too made their presence felt at a regular interval with a few sporadic attacks.
- And amongst all, C.R.Das and later Subhas Chandra Bose kept alive a trajectory which often deviated from the main Congress approach and had a powerful impact over the youth of Bengal.

Nazrul was a by-product of this period. Nazrul imbibed within himself the on-going political thinking of the period. But Nazrul never remained constant with any particular ideology. He initially followed the Gandhian path but soon deviated from it. He joined hands with C.R.Das and followed his foot-steps. But after Das' death, Nazrul got attracted towards the Left ideology in association with Muzaffar Ahmad. But even this was not consistent or continuous as music and spirituality took him away from active politics. Nazrul's 'rebellion' did not have a set definition. It kept changing its path with time. Scholars might see Nazrul as a 'footloose' and probably a reason why he did not get due recognition. But Nazrul always had a way to getting across to people. And since he could connect to people, we need to give him more credibility. A detailed analysis of Nazrul's political ideology shall be made in the sections to follow.

Nazrul's Anti-Imperialist Writings and his Nabojug-Dhumketu days -

Nabojug, a Bengali daily was brought out with the help of Abul Kashem Fazlul Haq (1873-1962), then a renowned advocate of the Calcutta High Court, and an influential Muslim leader of Bengal who was associated with the Congress, Muslim League and

the Khilafat movement²⁹. With financial support from Haq, Nazrul and Muzaffar Ahmad brought out the evening daily *Nabojug*. *Nabojug* commenced publication on 12 July 1920, with Fazlul Haq as editor and Nazrul Islam and Muzaffar Ahmad as joint editors. Essays and articles published in *Nabojug* carried the message that the country's political subjugation by the foreign powers was the ultimate misfortune a country could face. Nazrul declared this at the very outset of his article 'Amader Shokti Sthayi Hay Na Keno?' (Why does our power not endure?) 1920³⁰.

Nazrul in 'Amader Shokti...' talked of all kinds of restrictions imposed on man in a society. Nazrul's depicted a life which was full of restrictions not just because of colonial subjugation but also due to the societal restrictions. The societal norms referred not only to oppressive traditional customs but also to day to day social responsibilities, instead of restrictions. Here, Nazrul's extreme individualism seems to be clashing with the concept of a society and social responsibilities. As opposed to Nazrul, Bankim's discomfiture was related to the strong individualism, which, in the Indian context, he found both irresponsible and mischievous³¹. In a more general sense, he was also worried that individualism, when taken too far, would visibly affect the more pressing task of social integration. Nazrul, however, did not foresee any such problem with his idea of individualism. He rather felt that both conditions (individualism and social integration) would complement each other.

Nazrul saw the nationalist movement in India as an inevitable result of the general awakening and the anti-imperialist movement throughout the larger part of the world that characterized the 20th century – this is reflected in poem titled 'Bingsho Shatabdi'³². In another editorial entitled 'Gechhe Desh Dukho Nai, Abar Tora Manus Ho' (Regain your manliness even though this country is lost to us) Nazrul asserted that India was to be free without any further interruption for two reasons: the wave of

²⁹ D.F. Ahmad, *Kabi Nazrul O Saptadikpal*, Nazrul Niketan, Dhaka, 1998, p. 30. Also, Muzaffar Ahmad, *Nazrul Smritikatha*, p.15

³⁰ *Amader Shokti Sthayi Hay Na Keno?*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p.443. Translated by Priti Kumar Mitra in *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam*.

³¹ Amiya P. Sen, *Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay: An Intellectual Biography*, OUP, Delhi, 2008, pp. 24-25.

³² *Bingsho Shatabdi*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.4, p. 52.

freedom movement throughout the world, and due to the vicious cycle of historical process. By vicious cycle Nazrul meant that after a spell of slavery and humiliation, India would be entitled to enter into a period of freedom, power and prominence³³. In this article, Nazrul emphasized the moral demise of most Indians who were unable to think of any alternative to British rule. A similar concern for his country and his countrymen gets highlighted in his letter to Principal Ibrahim Khan³⁴. Nazrul understood the nation to be in a deep slumber, and he prescribed a hard physical blow as the means to wake it up.

Both, the Rowlatt Act and the Jallianwala Bagh massacres left a deep impact on the people of the country. 1919- 1920, when Nazrul made his first debut in the world of literature, the Indian population was undergoing a period of intense struggle and subjugation. The direct impact of the political situation of the country was widely reflected in Nazrul's writings. To cite an example, 'Dayarer Smritistambho'³⁵, by Nazrul, was published in *Nabojug* soon after the Jallianwala Massacre³⁶. Nazrul, in the mood of a severe irony suggested a memorial tower to be built for General Dyer. According to him, only such a monument would make the countrymen realize that it is time to strike back against the British rule. The monument would constantly remind them of the misery and pain of every single day under the British raj³⁷.

The Jallianwala Bagh incident remained vivid on Nazrul's mind. Apart from 'Dayarer Smritistambho', he wrote in *Nabojug* an article called 'Kala Admike Guli Mara' (To Shoot at the Black Man), which again dealt with a similar theme. Nazrul understood the British Indian administration as a combination of dominance, dictatorship and

³³ *Gechhe Desh Dukho Nai*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p. 417.

³⁴ Nazrul's letter to Principal Ibrahim Khan (December 1927), NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Vol. 2, Kolkata, 2004, p. 482. Principal Ibrahim Khan (1894-1978), was a well-known Muslim educationist and intellectual of the time.

³⁵ *Dayarer Smritistambho*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p. 420.

³⁶ Muzaffar Ahmad, op.cit. p. 34.

³⁷ *Dayarer Smritistambho*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p. 420.

cruelty³⁸. While addressing the current political scenario in the country, Nazrul also highlighted the problem of racism in the country. Mention may be made here of two articles in *Nabojug*, ‘Kala Admike Guli Mara’³⁹ (To Shoot at the Black Man) and ‘Shyam Rakhi na Kul Rakhi’⁴⁰ (Caught in a Dilemma) and a long poem on the Simon Commission’s Report (1930)⁴¹. Freedom of expression was what Nazrul preached and practiced. He believed that one of the major instruments of control exercised by the British was the frequent actions against the freedom of speech, both written and spoken. He explained this with illustrations in the article ‘Mukhbandho’⁴² (Gagged). By this time, however, the newspaper *Nabojug* had twice received warnings from the police. The third and last warning came for an article by Nazrul called ‘Muhajirin Hotyar Jonyo Dayi Ke?’⁴³ (Who’s responsible for killing the migrants?). In the first chapter we have discussed the incident on which this article was based. It was an intense, straightforward, well-reasoned and provocative piece of writing. Nazrul warned the British:

“Kintu aar aamra rakto dandiye mar khaibo na, aaghat khaiya khaiya opomane bedonaye aamader rakto eibar gorom hoiya uthiachhe”.
 (“But we will no longer remain dormant and get battered; the pain of repeated battering and dishonor already has our blood boiling”⁴⁴)

Nazrul’s inflammatory political articles in *Nabojug* provoked government reaction and ‘Muhajirin Hotyar Jonyo Dayi Ke?’ incited the last and severest warning. It was alleged that the newspaper printed circulars of the Khilafat Committee. The British officials never openly admitted that the real reason for confiscating the newspaper was Nazrul’s article. The newspaper’s security deposit of Rs. 1000 was confiscated.

³⁸ Close reading of Nazrul’s comments on the British administration on India in three *Nabojug* articles – *Mukhbandho*, *Shyam Rakhi na Kul Rakhi*, and *Lat-premik Ali Imam*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, Vol.1, 2004, pp. 435-50.

³⁹ *Kala Admike Guli Mara*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p.444.

⁴⁰ *Shyam Rakhi Na Kul Rakhi*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p. 446.

⁴¹ *Saiman Kamishaner Riport*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.3, pp. 226-229.

⁴² *Mukhbandho*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p.435.

⁴³ *Muhajirin Hotyar Jonyo Dayi Ke*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 1, p. 426.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Fazlul Haq, owner of the newspaper, had to deposit double the amount to get fresh clearance for the paper. However, Muzaffar Ahmad rightly suspected that the punishment was actually for Nazrul's article and not for the Khilafat circular⁴⁵. This suspicion of Ahmad was right as the article 'Muhajirin Hotyar...' was described as 'especially objectionable and preaches revolt against the existing administration' in a government official's comment made as late as in 1941⁴⁶. Nazrul himself also believed that it was his writings that made the colonial authorities take action against the newspaper. Nazrul expressed this opinion of his as late as in 1941 in a poem titled 'Nabojug' which he wrote for the *Nabojug*, (*Nabojug* was revived once again in 1940 with Nazrul as editor). Nazrul recalled in the poem the memory of the first *Nabojug*'s eclipse in these words:

“Hather lekhoni, kagojer pata, nahi dhal taloar,
Tabuo probal kede nilo durbaler sei odhikar”

(“There was pen& paper in my hand,
And not swords & shields.
But still the ruler took my right to,
record my grievances”⁴⁷)

We have earlier noted how Nazrul had been propagating armed rebellion as a solution to imperialism. At the same time, he was not averse to the Gandhian idea of non-violent resistance. At an all-India level, the political scenario was already dominated by the Non-cooperation movement. The Non-cooperation movement that had already been started by Gandhi in connection with the Khilafat movement was formally accepted as the official programme of the Indian National Congress at a special session on 4 September 1920. Nazrul was overwhelmed by Gandhi's all-India figure and his magnificent accomplishment in amongst the masses⁴⁸. In a 1920 editorial in *Nabojug*, Nazrul wrote with pleasure the magnificent impact of the recently launched

⁴⁵ Muzaffar Ahmad, op.cit., p.34.

⁴⁶File No. 58-31/40, Home (Pol), Sd/16.1.41, West Bengal State Archives, (WBSA). Also reproduced in Sisir Kar's, *Nisiddho Nojrul*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 1983, p.10.

⁴⁷ *Nabojug*, reproduced in NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 5, p. 135.

⁴⁸ Serajul Islam Choudhury, *Nazrul Islam: Poet and More*, Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, 1994, p.22

Non-cooperation movement⁴⁹. Nazrul admired Gandhi for certain other reasons as well, Gandhi's crusade against untouchability and his earnest hard work to bring together Hindus and Muslims in the anti-imperialist resistance.

Nazrul Islam spoke of Gandhi (by this time Nazrul had already left *Nabojug*), in a song titled 'Pagol Pothik' (Crazy Wayfarer, meaning Gandhi himself) in June 1921. This song was composed during the time when Non-cooperation movement was at its peak. Nazrul composed this at Comilla, East Bengal, and he himself sang it through the streets⁵⁰. This song shows how Nazrul welcomed Gandhian ideology. In the song, 'Pagol Pothik' Nazrul viewed Gandhi as the flagbearer of Indian freedom struggle. He saw in Gandhi a personification of truth, a person who brought together the dominant communities of India and in awakening the vast country in a non-violent approach. Gandhi's strategy, Nazrul wrote, showed an alternative to the fearsome trail of the revolutionaries.

While Gandhi's non-violence was seen as an alternate path to armed struggle in the Indian context – Nazrul supported Kamal Pasha's revolutionary mechanisms in the Turkish war. Clearly, Nazrul was in two minds at this juncture. Reference needs to be made here to the ongoing Khilafat movement during the same period. Nazrul was greatly inspired by Mustafa Kamal's armed uprising for national emancipation and hailed the Turkish war of liberation in a poem, 'Ranobheri'⁵¹ (War Trumpet), in August 1921. A month later Nazrul came up with one of his greatest compositions, 'Kamal Pasha'⁵², emerging as the foremost critic of the essentially reactionary and pan-Islamic ideology of Khilafat, and admiring instead nationalist Turkey that was emerging under the heroic leadership of Mustafa Kamal. Evidence of this is amply visible in Nazrul's poems composed between August and December 1921.

⁴⁹ *Mukhbando*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p.435

⁵⁰ Muzaffar Ahmad, op.cit. pp. 79-80.

⁵¹ *Ranobheri*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 1, p. 33.

⁵² *Kamal-Pasha*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 1, p.20.

The poem 'Ranobheri' made it clear that he was writing in sympathy with the rebel government of Kamal. The poem offered great excitement for the Muslim youth⁵³. 'Ranobheri' was followed by the equally famous poems 'Anwar' and 'Kamal Pasha' in October 1921 in praise of two Turkish heroes of the day. They gave even a more powerful and dramatic expression of the thoughts articulated in 'Ranobheri'.

Going back to the Indian situation and Gandhian ideology – Nazrul's support to Gandhi and non-violence took a u-turn when mob violence occurred at Chauri Chaura (22 February 1922)⁵⁴ and Gandhi called off the enormous Non-Cooperation movement (25 February 1922)⁵⁵. The termination of the Non-cooperation movement led to a change of impression about Gandhi in the eyes of Nazrul. This was quite common among the youth at that time and several nationalists, including Jawaharlal Nehru, were deeply disappointed by the withdrawal of the movement. They were unable at that time to see the need for such an action in the long-term strategic interest of the National Movement; Nehru was to see this later so did many others.

Nazrul too, disappointed by Gandhi's decision now stopped praising Gandhian ideology openly in his writings. The very first issue of *Dhumketu* (11 August 1922) carried the editorial 'Sarothir Pather Khabor', (News on the Charioteer's Path) promoting uncompromising individualism self-confidence and discovering of one's own self-image. Nazrul took Gandhi's example here and alleged that most people failed to grasp the true meaning of Gandhi. Rather than concentrating on the individual self and the power that each individual has within himself, the people concentrated on the charisma of Gandhi; people rallied after him chanting what 'Mahatma Gandhi does'⁵⁶. Nazrul challenged the cult figure of Gandhi and accused him of controlling the fate of the nation and its people. In this very article Nazrul also criticized the age old Indian practice of 'hero' worship and following the path of the

⁵³ *Ranobheri*, op.cit.

⁵⁴ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India: 1885-1947*, McMillan, New Delhi, 1983, p. 199.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ *Sarothir Pather Khabor*, *Dhumketu*, vol. 1, No.1, 11 August 1922, pp.3-4. Also reproduced as *Sarothir Pather Khabor* in NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, Vol. 5, p. 412

‘hero’ that overpowers the individual’s own power to stand up and choose an independent path.

A similar theme was again taken up by Nazrul in the editorials of *Dhumketu*, three issues later. In ‘Mora Sabai Swadhin Sabai Raja’⁵⁷ (We All are Free, We All are Kings), Nazrul gave his own interpretation of the term ‘swaraj’ – suggesting that only and only complete independence should be demanded; all were free and sovereign and thus, one should not be subordinated by any other power. In this piece of writing Nazrul did not directly mention Gandhi but an interpretation can be teased out of it particularly when Nazrul says that all authorities should be challenged. Nazrul urges the reader to refuse to comply with all authorities, be it one’s own countryman or be it a foreigner⁵⁸. As we can note, there was a sudden change in Nazrul’s perception on Gandhi. Disappointed by Gandhi he now tried to ‘free’ people from following Gandhi’s path. Having noted the distancing from Gandhi one cannot overlook two other songs by Nazrul in 1924, which show that Nazrul had not become anti-Gandhi.

Nazrul might not have believed in Gandhian non-violence, but he did not disrespect Gandhi as a leader. In April- May 1924, Gandhi visited Hugli in Bengal. As mentioned in the first chapter, Nazrul’s family life had just begun in Hughli. The poet warmly welcomed Gandhi with his composition titled ‘Banglay Mahatma’ (The Mahatma in Bengal); this poem highlighted the incredible encouragement Gandhi’s stay received throughout Bengal. Here again Nazrul made it a point to acknowledge Gandhi’s attempt towards the removal of untouchability⁵⁹. He also wrote long song on ‘*Charkhar Gaan*’ (Song of the Spinning-Wheel) that symbolized Gandhi’s principles of peacefulness and autonomy. The song acknowledged the ‘charkha’ as a tool against the imperialist power, a magnificent way to stir the people and again, a practical bind between the two communities of the Hindus and Muslims. In praise of the Charkha Nazrul wrote these few lines:

“Ghurcho, Ghurcho tumi Charkha,

⁵⁷ *Mora Sabai Swadhin*, *Dhumketu*, Vol.1, No.4, 22 August 1922, p.3. Also reproduced in NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 2, p. 417

⁵⁸ *Ibid*

⁵⁹ *Banglay Mahatma*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.3, p. 15

Tor ghorarshabdo bhai, sadai shunte jeno pai,
Oi khullo Swaraj-shinghoduvar,
Ar bilambha nai, ar bilambha nai,
Shurjo uday holo Bharot er dike,
Bhagya elo ebar amader dike, ar bilambha nai”.

(“Revolve, oh revolve, my dear spinning-wheel!
There I hear in the sound of your wheels, may I hear them always,
It seems all of us do hear in your whirling sound the Lion gate of Swaraj opens,
That there won’t be any more delay. The sun that is India’s
Destiny has rolled back, the sorrowful night is over⁶⁰”).

Thus, one can see that Nazrul while disagreeing with Gandhi’s decision to withdraw the Non Cooperation Movement simultaneously was able to appreciate Gandhi’s anti-imperialist and pro-poor role.

Nazrul left *Nabojug* in December 1920 and after some months of strange experiences outlined in the first chapter, resumed his literary career in August 1921. Between August and October 1921 a series of intensely anti-imperialist poems by Nazrul engaged the readers. Reference has already been made to ‘Mustafa Kamal’, ‘Anwar’, and ‘Ranobheri’. Finally, Nazrul’s voice found its supreme expression in the gigantic poem ‘Bidrohi’ (The Rebel) in January 1922:-

“Ami Parashuram er kothor kuthar,
Ni:kshtriya koribo vishwa,
Aanibo shanty shanto udaar!
Ami hal Balaram-skandha-e,
Upari felibo adhin vishwa obohele naba shrusti er mahananda!
Maha Bidrohi rana klanto, ami sei din hobo shanto.
Uthpidite-r krandon rol aakash ey baataash ey dhawnibey na
Ottacharir khargo-kripan bheem ronno bhumei ronibey na
Ami Bidrohi rana klanto, ami sei din hobo shanto”

(“I’m Parashuram’s merciless axe.
I’ll rid the world of all the war-mongers and bring peace.
I’m the plough on Balaram’s shoulders.
I’ll uproot this subjugated world in the joy of recreating it.
Weary of battles, I, the Great rebel,
Shall rest in peace only when the anguished cry of the oppressed
Shall no longer reverberate in the sky and the air,
And the tyrant’s bloody sword
will no longer rattle in battlefields.
Only then shall I, the rebel,
Rest in peace”⁶¹)

⁶⁰ *Charkhar Gan*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p.119

Nazrul Islam's rhapsody – 'Bidrohi' (The Rebel) – is one of the most famous poems in Bengali. Its dazzling array of images and metaphors drawn from numerous sources, Hindu, Islamic and Greek, strung together in apparent disregard of logic, are difficult to translate. This excerpt does not show the Islamic and Greek imagery and the Hindu imagery is prominent.

'Bidrohi' is a proclamation of the supreme power of man, man the arch 'rebel' who breaks all laws, the ageless unconquerable power who in the joy of life rages in fury across heaven and earth to attack this world of oppression and ugliness. 'Bidrohi' was first published on 6th January 1922 in *Bijoli*⁶². With the publication of this poem Kazi Nazrul Islam was given the epithet, 'Bidrohi Kobi' or the 'Rebel' poet in the Bengali language. In my understanding, with this poem Nazrul also became a self-proclaimed 'rebel'. *Bijoli* was started by Barindra Ghosh, brother of the famous Aurobindo Ghosh (15 August 1872 – 5 December 1950). Barindra, himself actively associated with political militancy and revolutionary groups, had recently returned from the Andamans after ten years in the notorious Cellular jail. Nazrul had great respect for this outstanding Jugantar revolutionary. It was to Barindra Ghosh that Nazrul dedicated his 1st collection of poetry 'Agnibina'⁶³ [Fiery Lyre (1922)].

In *Bidrohi* a self-proclaimed 'rebel', Nazrul asks every individual to call himself a 'rebel'. He wishes to spread the fear of that 'rebellious individual' amongs all the oppressive powers in society. The same sentiment would be expressed in a more melodious shorter poem called 'Prolayollas'⁶⁴ (The Delight of Annihilation) composed in April 1922.

In June 1922, Nazrul came to be associated with *Sebak* (Servant), a daily newspaper that had been feeding on the Non-cooperation excitement but also weakening in

⁶¹ *Bidrohi*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p. 7.

⁶² In fact, *Bidrohi* was first printed in the *Moslem Bharat*, but the monthly magazine did not come out in time.

⁶³ *Agnibina*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, pp.1-41

⁶⁴ *Prolayollas*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p.5

importance with the decline of the movement. The *Sebak* authorities brought Nazrul to boost their sales by the magic of his name and writing. *Sebak* was, however, owned by an orthodox Muslim leader, Maulana Akram Khan (1868-1968), who was more intent on a cultural crusade against the Hindus⁶⁵. It is important to take a note of this association of Nazrul with *Sebak* as this marked the beginning of the practice of distorting Nazrul's writings⁶⁶. Nazrul was eventually forced to leave *Sebak* as his writings were published in distorted form⁶⁷. A few weeks after drifting away from 'Sebak', Nazrul started his own bi-weekly called *Dhumketu* (The Comet)⁶⁸. *Dhumketu* appeared first on 11 August 1922. Nazrul asked for messages of goodwill for his paper. I quote here Rabindranath Tagore's message which outlined the purpose of Nazrul's coming out with the bi-weekly:

“Come, ye comet
Come to build a bridge of fire across the dark.
Hoist up your flag of victory,
on top of the castle of ominous time.
Let omens be curved on the forehead of night,
and awake by startling,
those who are drowsing”.⁶⁹

We shall now take a closer look at the poems and articles which highlighted Nazrul's ideology in *Dhumketu* and also its association with the Bengal revolutionaries. In *Dhumketu*, Nazrul set out to propagate the mission that he had earlier begun with in 'Bidrohi'. *Dhumketu* assumed a most radical attitude towards the colonial government and published all pro-nationalist news with sarcastic comments. We shall concentrate on a few significant points here. Nazrul was making an effort to bring back to life the

⁶⁵ Serajul Islam Choudhury, op.cit. p. 67

⁶⁶ Rafiqul Islam and Muzaffar Ahmad point out the fact that Nazrul's articles were distorted by some of the Muslim journals by anonymous writers. They usually copied Nazrul's style of writing, especially his way using the language and rhyme.

⁶⁷ Rafiqul Islam, *Jibon O Kobita*. p.87

⁶⁸ The Publisher/printer was M.Afzalul Haq, up to 25th October 1922; Then Kazi Nazrul Islam up to 8th November 1922 & Amaresh Kanjilal from 11th November 1922 till 1923.

⁶⁹ *Dhumketu*, Vol.1, No.1, 11 August 1922, p.2. Also reproduced in NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p.16. Translated by Rafiqul Islam, *Kazi Nazrul Islam: A New Anthology*, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1990

Jugantar revolutionary tradition in *Dhumketu* by making extensive use of symbols from Hindu mythology, particularly the god-demon dichotomy⁷⁰.

On 13th October 1922 it also demanded complete independence for India. In the editorial ‘Dhumketur Path’ Nazrul wrote:

“Loke jiggesh kore amay bare bare – Dhumketu-r path ta ki? Tai aaj boli – sarboprothom, Dhumketu Bharot-er swadhinata chay. Swaraj-taraj bujhi na, kenona, o-kathar mane ek ek maharothi eke k rokom kore thaken. Bharotbarser ek paromanu ansho-o bidesher odhin thakbe na. Bharotbarser sampurno dayitvo, sampurno swadhinata rokkha, shashonbhar, somosto thakbe bharotiyer haathe. Tate kono bideshir modoli korbar odhikartuku porjonto thakbe na”.

(“People have asked me repeatedly ‘What’s the path of Dhumketu?’. First and foremost, the Dhumketu wants full and complete independence of India. We do not know what Swaraj and such other words mean. For, our leaders are putting many different senses into that word (Swaraj). Not even an atom’s size of Indian land shall remain under foreign domination. India’s complete responsibilities, defence of her freedom, administrative work – all shall be in the hands of Indians. No foreigner shall ever have any right to be our boss over these matters”.⁷¹)

Yet another path breaking work of Nazrul was – “Anondomoyir Agamone⁷² (On the arrival of the Goddess of Bliss)”. Worship of goddess Durga in Bengal marks week-long of festivities right after the autumn harvest is over. Nazrul wrote this poem at the request of a recently started daily called *Anandabazar Potrika* for its special puja edition. However, this poem was not published in the paper Muzaffar Ahmad suspected that the authorities of the newly begun paper cautiously avoided the piece by the poet. ‘Anondomoyir Agamone’ had hence to be published in *Dhumketu* (no.12) on 26 September 1922⁷³.

Breaking all conventions, Nazrul, even as a Muslim, invoked the goddess as the spirit of war and destruction and asked for her intervention in the struggle for the national

⁷⁰ Sushil Kumar Gupta, *Nojrul Charitmanas*, Dey’s Publishing, Kolkata, 2007, p. 256

⁷¹ *Dhumketur Path*, *Dhumketu*, Vol.1, No.13, 13 October 1922, also reproduced in NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 2, p.438.

⁷² *Anondomoyir Agamone*, reproduced in NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p. 204.

⁷³ *Dhumketu*, Vol.3, No.12, 26 September 1922.

emancipation. In this piece of writing, Nazrul again proclaimed that armed-rebellion was the only way to freedom against the British power. Nazrul decided revolutionary extremism as the worthiest and the most appropriate answer to India's problem of political subjugation⁷⁴.

The ideology of armed revolt as the sole method of liberating India from foreign control was further presented in a series of other poems and articles in *Dhumketu*. Foremost among the poems were 'Dhumketu' (Comet), 'Raktambara-dharini Ma', (The Red-Robed Mother), and 'Duhshasoner Raktopan' (Drinking the blood of Duhshasan). 'Bidrohi' was again reproduced in *Dhumketu*. Among the editorial pieces written by Nazrul, which were most of the times inflammatory, most startling were 'Rudro-Mongol' (Auspicious Rudra), 'Amra Lokhichharar Dal', (We the ones forsaken by the Goddess of Fortune), 'Bis-Bani' (Venomous Message), 'Mai Bhukha Hun' (I am Hungry), 'Dhumketur Poth' (Dhumketu's Path), and 'Ami Soinik' (I am a Soldier). The above mentioned articles and poems reflected more or less the same ideology. In 'Amra Lokhichharar Dal' Nazrul called upon the disillusioned youth to come along with him to create with their lives a new world. In 'Rudro Mongol' Nazrul wrote on the plight of the peasants and workers and called for an armed rebellion against the exploiters⁷⁵ and 'Bis-Bani' is a pungent attack on the traitors⁷⁶ of the country. Nazrul cited the example of an "Irish youth who killed Robert Emmett (a traitor) and wrote on his dead body 'how a traitor should be treated'. And later hung this body to a tree in a public place" - Nazrul was inspired by this incident. He believed that all Indians who worked together with the Britishers should have the same fate, if not worse.

In 'Mai Bhukha Hun' Nazrul portrayed "a mad woman with eyes that were tearful and yet emitting fire; whose only cry was that she was hungry. Young men were seen to attempt responding to her cry but were disallowed to do so by their parents. After some time, the cry proved irresistible and quite a number of people responded. They asked her if she wanted food. There was no reply. They asked if she wanted clothes.

⁷⁴ See first half of the long poem in NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, 2005, Vol.1, p.15.

⁷⁵ *Dhumketu*, Vol.1, No.1, 11 August 1922, p.2

⁷⁶ By traitors, Nazrul referred to the Indian collaborators of the British Government.

But she kept crying without answering, simply repeating that she was hungry. She was recognized – she was the Mother Earth. The blood of young men boiled, they realized that it was blood that she demanded. The Mother was no longer a mad woman but the goddess who bestowed kindness and smiles on her children. “Those who gave their blood were not dead, they were immortals”: was the message given by the Mother. Apparently symbolic of the sacrifice of the revolutionary blood for the Mother country, this article created a stir at the time⁷⁷.

Dhumketu appeared to be the true successor of *Jugantar* and *Sandhya*, were the two Bengali organs of the revolutionaries in the first decade of the 20th century⁷⁸. *Islam Darshon*, a hostile rival of *Dhumketu*, also noticed an influence of *Sandhya* on *Dhumketu*'s language⁷⁹. The very first issue of *Dhumketu* carried a picture of Barindra Kumar Ghosh captioned, ‘Banglar Prothom Dhumketu Phansir Barindro’ (The first *Dhumketu* of Bengal, Barindra of the Gallows)⁸⁰. The 12th issue of *Dhumketu* quite strongly came out with its message for the martyrs. The 12th issue had a section devoted to the early martyrs of 1908 ‘Shohid Pristha’ (Martyrs Page). Martyrs who found a mention in this section were, Khudiram (1889-1908), Satyen Basu (1882-1908), and Prafulla Chaki (1888-1908), as well as ‘Bagha Jatin’ an epithet given to Jatindranath Mukhopadhyay⁸¹. (1880-1915)⁸².

In the poem ‘Khudiram’ (Khudiram Bose, the 19 year old boy who was the first in Bengal’s revolutionary movement to give up his life on the gallows) Nazrul suggests that every boy born since (after his death) was Khudiram reborn and called upon their mothers to let go of their sons so that they could join the battle for freedom. In the editorial ‘Ami-Soinik’, the same message was passionately carried forward. With

⁷⁷ *Mai Bhukha Hun*, *Dhumketu*, Vol.1, No.9, also reproduced in NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 2, p.420

⁷⁸ D.H. Ahmad, op.cit. , p. 89

⁷⁹ ‘Samoyik Sahityo’, *Islam Darshon*, Vol.3, No.1, September 1922, p.47.

⁸⁰ *Dhumketu*, Vol.1, No. 1, 11 August 1922.

⁸¹ The Battle of Balashore, fought between the revolutionaries and the British police was recounted in that section. Jatindranath Mukhopadhyay (7 December 1879 – 10 September 1915), a revolutionary, was the primary leader of the *Jugantar* party.

⁸² Pranatosh Chattopadhyay, *Sangbadik Nojrul*, The Versatiles, Kolkata, 1978, p.68

much passion Nazrul would appeal to them in the piece to raise their heads again⁸³. It is important for us to note here that, Nazrul Islam was never a member of any revolutionary group, nor was his paper a revolutionary organ.

'*Dhumketu*' not only preached and practiced the path of armed rebellion but also devoted much of its pages to the developments in the Islamic world. Events concerning the latter were given special importance, so much so, that an exclusive section called 'Muslim Jahan' (The Muslim World) would be devoted to them in each issue. Indeed, Mustafa Kamal became an subject of hero worship in *Dhumketu*. Articles like, 'Sabas Kamal'⁸⁴ (Bravo Kamal), 'Kamal Bandona'⁸⁵ (Salutation to Kamal) by Sarasi Bala Basu⁸⁶, and finally the editorial 'Kamal'⁸⁷ by Nazrul himself tells us the importance and relevance that was given to Kamal Pasha in the pages of *Dhumketu*. The poem 'Kamal Pasha' was reprinted in *Dhumketu*.

The anti-British articles in *Dhumketu* obviously led the administration to take punitive action. The colonial government came forward with a proscription order on 'Anodomoyir Agamone' and 'Bidrohir Koifiyat' (by Lila Mitra). Simultaneously, a case was filed against editor Nazrul Islam and his printer and publisher under Section 124A of the IPC⁸⁸. We shall now discuss the verses that he wrote in prison, specially focusing on 'Rajbondir Jabanbondi' [Statement of a Political Prisoner, 7 January 1923], a statement which Nazrul submitted in Bengali. 'Rajbandir Jabanbondi', is an illustration of Nazrul's exceptional talent in composing a "prose-poetry", in which his character has been finely coloured in the poetic, political, spiritual, personal and universal shades. His expressions are powerful, uncompromising, and eloquent. Below are a few translated lines to illustrate:-

⁸³ *Ami Soinik*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.2, p.424

⁸⁴ *Dhumketu*, vol.1, No.8, 12 September 1922, p.6

⁸⁵ *Dhumketu*, vol.1, No.4. 22 August 1922, p. 12

⁸⁶ Her identity is not known.

⁸⁷ *Dhumketu*, vol.3, No. 1, September 1922, pp.14.

⁸⁸ The details of Nazrul's imprisonment have already been discussed in the previous chapter.

“The charge against me: I am a rebel against the Crown. Therefore, I am now a prisoner, convicted by a royal court. On one side is the Royal Crown, on the other, the flame of the Comet. What is behind the king is insignificant; behind me is Shiva Himself. I am an instrument for revealing the truth. Maybe some cruel power may be able to imprison that instrument, may even be able to destroy it; but one who plays the instrument, in that lyre who plays the message of Shiva, who can imprison Him?

The proscribed message of mine will once again be expressed through other voices. The music of my flute will not die simply because my flute has been confiscated. Today, India is subjugated. Its people are slaves. This is the absolute truth. In this kingdom, to call a slave a slave, injustice an injustice, is sedition.

I am highly confident about what I say. What I have understood to be unjust, oppression, a lie – I have called it just that – without trying to please anyone or to receive praise or a favour. I have not merely rebelled against the injustices of the king, but my sword like truth has also attacked and rebelled against the society, race and nation. I reassure you – I have no fear, no regrets. I am a son of the Immortal. I know that – the tyrant’s tormenting of the truth comes to an end; in that truth lays my destiny⁸⁹”.

The statement reveals Nazrul’s courage and forthrightness and how greatly he could risk his personal security when the question of the country came up. As we can see, in this statement he claimed that his writings were inspired and they pronounced the stark truth about India’s enslavement. Evidently, Nazrul’s ‘offence’ was too obvious to be overlooked by a British judge. Once in jail Nazrul also launched a hunger strike against the ill-treatment of the convicts in the hands of the jail superintendent. This act again sent a very strong political message throughout the country. Apart from ‘Rajbondir Jabanbondi’ there were at least two other poems of rebellion – ‘Sebak’ (Servant) and the famous ‘Shikol Parar Gan’ (Song of Enchainment) that called for heroic efforts to tear off all bondages.

Subsequent to the *Dhumketu* period a number of important events including imprisonment, hunger strike, love and marriage introduced new elements in the poet’s life and his writings found new dimensions. Brief references to these have already been made in a previous chapter. The newly found dimensions in Nazrul’s writings could be seen in his famous ‘*Dolan Champa*’ [(The Magnolia), 1923], ‘*Puber Hawa*’ [(Eastern Winds), 1925] ‘*Sindhu Hindol*’ [(Undulation on the Sea), 1927], ‘*Charbak*’

⁸⁹ *Rajbondir Jabanbondi*, reproduced in NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, pp. 459-464. Here, Nazrul tries to justify his power as an individual by proclaiming himself to be the messenger of god. He not only highlights the power of an individual but also that of the Almighty. Surprisingly, in *Bidrohi* he had negated any supernatural power and here he has submitted himself to it. This again reflects Nazrul’s contradictory nature. Translated by Rafiqul Islam, *Kazi Nazrul Islam: A New Anthology*, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1990.

[(The Flamingo), 1929]. These are collection of poems on love and beauty (we have discussed this segment in the previous chapter).

The Poet's participation in Active Politics -

The anti-British spirit of Nazrul never really mellowed down, and kept reappearing time and again through his various books on poems and songs. 'Abhay-montro' [The Mantra of Reassurance], 'Atmashokti' [Self-strength], 'Sebak' [Servant], 'Bidrohir Bani' [The Rebel's Message] and 'Bhoot Bhaganor Gan' [The song to drive away ghosts] reiterated the idea of armed rebellion. These poems, along with some other poems, were published in the volume '*Biser Banshi*' [The Poison Flute, August 1924]⁹⁰. Around the same time another book of Nazrul was published entitled 'Bhangar Gan' [Song of Destruction]. This book carried some '*Dhumketu*' and '*pre-Dhumketu*' poems; to name a few - 'Bhangar Gan', 'Jagoroni', and 'Dushasoner Raktopan'.

A few lines from 'Bidrohir Bani' would reveal how Nazrul yet again carried the spirit of challenging the colonial power. In this poem, the 'prison' symbolized the rule of the oppressor.

“Amra jani shoja kawtha, poorna swadhin korbo desh,
Ei dodaloon bijoy-mishan, morte achhi morbo sesh”⁹¹

(“We know the straight forward deal that
We'll bring full independence to our country,
Here we unfurl the flag of victory!
If we need to sacrifice our lives,
We'll do that boldly”)

Nazrul's compositions were always under the scrutiny of both police and the Home Political department of the Bengal government⁹². Both '*Biser Banshi*' and '*Bhangar-Gan*', were proscribed within weeks of their publication. In a few weeks time, several

⁹⁰ *Bidrohir Bani*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 4, p. 34.

⁹¹ *Bhangar Gan*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p.143.

⁹² Report on Native Papers, No. 35-42, 1924-5. (WBSA).

departments of the state government were fervently corresponding among themselves regarding 'Biser-Banshi'. Akshay K. Dattagupta, reported (24 September 1924) to the Director of Public Instruction that the content of 'Biser-Banshi', 'was of a most objectionable nature, capable of inciting young men to rebellion'⁹³. 'Biser Banshi' was proscribed on 22 October 1924. The message was carried in a Gazette notification by Chief Secretary A.N. Moberly⁹⁴. Similarly, Nazrul's 'Bhangar-Gan' was also proscribed by the government as it contained allegedly 'inflammatory' poems aimed at inspiring rebellion against the British government in India.

Nazrul's political thought was largely a combination of influences that he received from Bengal revolutionary groups, militant nationalism in Turkey, and Bolshevism in Soviet Russia. In practical politics, Nazrul was drawn to Chitta Ranjan Das. On the personal side, as we have already seen Nazrul was driven close to C.R.Das and his family. However, his association with Das could not last long due to the sudden demise of the latter in 1925. Nazrul wrote the book '*Chittanama*' in memory of C.R.Das. '*Chittanama*', is a slender volume of verse⁹⁵.

After Das' death in 1925, Nazrul moved further towards Left ideology. Regardless of recurring accusations of British officials and some intellectuals that the entire movement was just a foreign conspiracy organized from Moscow, Indian Communism rose up from within the nationalist movement itself as disillusioned revolutionaries, Non-cooperators, Khilafatists and labour and peasant activists sought new roads to political and social emancipation⁹⁶. Around this time again an influential leftist group was active in the Congress in Bengal and Nazrul readily joined this group and was made a member of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee. Nazrul's move towards the radical left was quite fast. He travelled to the Basirhat constituency in order to work for Qutubuddin Ahmad, a leftist politician who sought election from

⁹³ Dattagupta to Department of Public Instruction as reproduced in the book, Sisir Kar, *British Raj and the Rebel Poet Nazrul*, Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, 2010, p.14.

⁹⁴ Gazette Notification, File No. 5S-20(1924) B- November 1924/ 184-88(Proceedings in file record), WBSA.

⁹⁵ Nazrul and his association with C.R.Das has been discussed in the previous chapter.

⁹⁶ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India: 1885-1947*, Mcmillan, New Delhi, p.247.

there. In November 1925, Hemanta Sarkar, Qutubuddin Ahmad, Kazi Nazrul Islam, and Shamsuddin Hussain formed the 'Labour Swaraj Party of the Indian National Congress' at Kolkata⁹⁷.

On 16th December 1925, the party's organ, the weekly *Langol* (Plough), started publication with Nazrul Islam as the chief editor⁹⁸. The 'special edition' carried the biography of Karl Marx, and the translation of Gorky's *Mother*. However, the main attraction of the special edition was a whole bunch of Nazrul's new poems entitled 'Samyobadi' [The Egalitarian]. This anthology included Samyo (Equality), 'Chor-Dakat', 'Kuli-Mojur' (Coolies and Labourers), 'Manus' (Man), 'Pap' (Sin), (Thieves & Robbers), *Barangana* (Prostitutes), Raja-Proja (King and Subjects) and 'Ishwar' (God)⁹⁹. Just by going through the title of the poems we get to see how these poems were directed towards the oppressed classes of the society. Later issues of *Langol* would carry more of Nazrul's socialist verses such as in 'Krishaner Gan' (Peasants' song), 'Shromiker Gan' (Workers' Song), 'Jeleder Gan' (Fishermen's Song), and the anthology *Sarbohara* (The Have-nots).

Muzaffar Ahmad contributed numerous articles to *Langol* interpreting India's history and political problems with a Left perspective. However, *Langol* was short-lived, it was published only for fifteen weeks and the final issue came out on 15 April 1926¹⁰⁰. A few months later, a new weekly, *Gonobani* (People's Voice), came into being as the organ of the newly formed 'Bengal Peasants' and Workers' Party', under Muzaffar Ahmad's editorship. The first issue of *Gonobani* (12 August 1926) carried a notice stating that it incorporated the *Langol*¹⁰¹. The major concern for Nazrul Islam's politics during 1926-27 remained peasants and other downtrodden classes. In this respect Nazrul was in close connection with the socialists of Kolkata like Hemanta

⁹⁷ Muzaffar Ahmad., op.cit. p.184

⁹⁸ I could locate only the first issue of *Langol*, the special edition that is, 16 December 1925 at National Library, Kolkata. The other issues have not been preserved hence the poems and articles have been taken from 'Nazrul Rachona Samagra'.

⁹⁹ *Samyobadi*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.2, p.73.

¹⁰⁰ See Pranatosh Chattopadhyay, *Kaji Nojrul*, op.cit, pp. 107-26.

¹⁰¹ Muzaffar Ahmad, op.cit. p.71.

Kumar Sarkar, Qutubuddin Ahmad, Shamsuddin Hussain, Muzaffar Ahmad and Saumyendra Nath Tagore – all potential communists. Nazrul lived in Krishnanagar from January 1926 to December 1928 and these years were full of political activities and prolific creativity. The year 1926 was perhaps the most active political period in Nazrul's life, when he became almost a professional politician. During this period he regularly attended Peasants' Conferences, Student Conferences and many Workers' Conferences¹⁰².

The creation of the 'Bengal Peasants' and Workers' Party' was on the agenda of the All Bengal Peasant Congress. The matter was discussed at a conference convened at 6-7th February, 1926, at Krishnanagar, West Bengal.¹⁰³ The decision was taken in favour of forming the new party. This party was nothing but just the 'Labour Swaraj Party of the Indian National Congress' with a new name; though the 'Bengal Peasants' and Workers' party'. Later on, of course, the party was known as 'The Workers' and Peasants' Party of Bengal'. Nazrul was a member on the executive committee of the newly formed The Workers' and Peasants' Party. During the inauguration of this party, Nazrul composed the 'Krisaner Gan' (Peasants' Song) and sang it himself¹⁰⁴.

In October 1926 was published the volume entitled '*Sarbohara*' (The Have-Nots), [printed by Sasi Bhusan Pal at the Metcalfe Press, Calcutta and published by Sri Braja Bihari Burman Roy of the Burman-Publishing House, Calcutta. It was a collection of Nazrul's socialist poems and songs printed before in *Langol* (December 1925-April 1926) magazine¹⁰⁵. Included in this were some particular poems which became an eye sore for the British government like the – 'Krisaner Gan' (Peasants' Song), 'Dhibarer

¹⁰² The details about the conferences attended and participated by Nazrul have been dealt with in the fifth chapter.

¹⁰³ 6-7 February, 1926, Conference was held in Krishnanagar, West Bengal. See Rafiqul Islam, *Jibon-O-Kobita*, p. 139.

¹⁰⁴ Muzaffar Ahmad, op.cit, pp.187-190.

¹⁰⁵ *Sarbohara*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 2, p.118.

Gan' (Fishermen's Song), 'Raja-Praja' (The King and the Subjects) and 'Phoriyad' (Complaint)¹⁰⁶.

As expected, government officials were prompted to recommend the proscription of the book. Police Commissioner C.A. Tegart and Public Prosecutor Ray Bahadur Taraknath Sadhu recommended for the proscription of Nazrul's 'Sarbohara'. C.A. Tegart's report reads;

“This book is named *Sarbohara* after the title of its first poem. The poem in its last stanza called upon the boatman (figuratively) to leave his boat and to take to land, and to make his feet blood-stained by striking them against hard ground. Almost all the poems breathe a spirit of revolt”¹⁰⁷.

Eventually though the British government considered banning the publication of the book under the Terrorist Suppression Act but the book was never formally banned. Around the same time Nazrul, amidst his intense political preoccupation, came out with 'Puber Hawa' (collection of poems on love and nature) and 'Jhing Phul' [The Cucurbitaccus Flower] a collection of children's poems.

Nazrul Islam was now active in politics, a member of the Provincial Congress Committee, and was to attend the Annual Conference (to be held in May 1926), along with a Youth Conference and a Student Conference. But just before the Provincial Congress Conference began, Hindu-Muslim riots broke out in Kolkata. Nazrul's opinion on this Hindu-Muslim riot and his general opinion on the relation shared between the two communities shall be further discussed in the next chapter. We shall also see how strongly Nazrul reacted right after the riot through his poem 'Kandari Hunshiyar' (Helmsman, Beware) to chase away the communal spirit. He wrote a series in of poems and songs between 1926-27 to bring the two communities together, namely – 'Mondir O Masjid' (Temple and Mosque), 'Hindu-Musalman' (Hindus and Muslims), 'Ja Shotru Pare Pare' (What the Enemies Could Do), 'Hindu-Muslim Yuddho' (Hindu-Muslim War), 'Mora Ek Brinte Duti Kushum' (Two Flowers of the same Stem) and 'Pather Disha' (Road Direction).

¹⁰⁶ Serajul Islam Choudhury, op.cit. p.51

¹⁰⁷ File No. 13, SP 1-3, 1927, Home (Political) Confidential, Bengal Govt. (WBSA).

In October 1926, Nazrul announced his intention to contest the election (scheduled for the following month), for one of the two seats reserved for Muslims for the Central Legislative Assembly in the predominantly Muslim division of Dhaka. Prima facie, this looks to be a strange decision on part of Nazrul to contest election for a reserved seat.

Nazrul lost the election miserably. With this particular event in mind it becomes difficult to judge what political ideas Nazrul had which pushed him to contest the election. After the loss in election, once again, we see Nazrul inclined towards Left wing politics with the release of his book 'Phoni-Monsa' in 1927. Its varied contents included a number of pro-independence poems as well as a translation of the 'Antor-Nyashonal Songit' (International Song)¹⁰⁸, and some Leftist songs like the – 'Rakto Patakar Gan' (Song of the Red Flag), and 'Jagar- Turjo'¹⁰⁹ (Bugle of Awakening).

As we have noted in this chapter and the previous, Nazrul's participation in active politics and his contribution towards political journalism decreased over the years. Gradually, his contribution in the field of music composition increased to the extent of affecting his involvement in politics and political writings. Nazrul himself admitted this fact in a letter to Rabindranath Tagore¹¹⁰. However, at intervals he came up with some works which once again reflected his political ideology. In 1930, Nazrul came up with one volume of 'liberation' poems – 'Prolay Shikha' (Flame of Annihilation, August 1930) [Printed at the Mohamaya Press, and published from Masjidbari Street, Kolkata, by the author himself]. Several of the poems in the volume were older compositions, but not published earlier because of the sedition law¹¹¹. Within weeks

¹⁰⁸ 'International Song', originally composed in French by a French worker, the 'International Song' symbolizes revolutionary unity of workers all over the world. Translated in many languages it is, however, sung with the same notation for the sake of uniformity in music. In NRS, *Antar-national-sangeet*, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.3, p.31.

¹⁰⁹ This was composed after Shelley's poem on labourers. See Rafiqul Islam, *Jibon O Kobita*, op.cit, p. 156.

¹¹⁰ See letter to Rabindranath Tagore (1932), reproduced in D.F.Ahmad, op.cit. p. 22.

¹¹¹ Statement of Braja Bihari Barman, as quoted in NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.3, p.531

of publication 'Prolay Shikha' came under police scrutiny and the book was proscribed on 15th September 1930¹¹².

The last book of Nazrul to be proscribed by the colonial government was 'Chandrabindu' (The Nasal Dot) was published in September 1931. This collection of poems is made up of two parts, one patriotic, and the other comic. But there is no contradiction between the two; for indeed the comic part is deeply patriotic as well. The poet speaks of a weeping mother, who is really his country. Fear prevails and almost stifles her tears. But there must be a rising against tyranny, the poet says. The second section takes up the theme in a humorous and indirect manner. Here the poet makes fun of the absurdities in the public and social life in an occupied land. He wants the readers to wake up their responsibilities of correcting what is ridiculous in their lives. The poet also ridicules the cowardice of the middle-class Bengalees. The volume made its mark among the readers and the government; the one acclaimed, and the other banned it promptly (proscribed on 14 October 1931)¹¹³.

Chandrobindu contained a number of satires on various contemporary political ideas and steps that had bearing on the freedom movement. 'Pyakt'¹¹⁴ (Pact), 'Dominiyan Stetas'¹¹⁵ (Dominion Status), "De Gorur Ga Dhuiye"¹¹⁶ (Wash the Cow's Body)", 'Raund-Tebil Kanpharens'¹¹⁷ (Round Table Conference), and 'Saiman Kamishaner Riport'¹¹⁸ (Simon Commission's Report) are full of attacks on British imperialism and its Gandhian remedy. In the poem 'De Gorur Ga Dhuiye', Nazrul made fun of some people's ideas and interest in the concept of a Swaraj. In a similar poem on the Round

¹¹² Gazette Notification No. 14087P, 17th September 1930 (WBSA).

¹¹³ Gazette Notification No. 17625P, Dated 14 Oct 1931 (WBSA).

¹¹⁴ *Pyakt*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.3, p.210

¹¹⁵ *Dominiyan Stetas*, *ibid.*, vol.3, p. 218.

¹¹⁶ *De Gorur Ga Dhuiye*, *ibid.*, vol.3, p.220.

¹¹⁷ *Raund Tebil Kanpharens*, *ibid.*, vol.3, p. 222.

¹¹⁸ *Saiman Kamishaner Riport*, *ibid.*, vol.3, pp. 226-229.

table Conference, he mocked the leaders as incapable priests going to offer courses on Advaita Vedanta to the tiger¹¹⁹.

During the same time he wrote 'Amar Koifiyat' (My Explanation, Sept-Oct 1925). Here Nazrul reiterated his complaint against the imprecise idea of swaraj that had by now become vicious mirage constantly misleading the people. Nazrul says that huge money had been collected in the name of Swaraj, but Swaraj was not attained. He says

“We know it well – by trying to bring Swaraj,
we’ve ended up with worthless pile of trash.
By depriving crores of hungry children of their food,
came a crore rupees – but not Swaraj.
But the hungry children don’t want Swaraj,
They want some rice and salt”¹²⁰

In conclusion, Nazrul reiterated his command for total independence and declared: “We don’t want leaders, we want generals”¹²¹.

Writings on the Awakening of Women -

Along with Nazrul’s anti-imperialist writings and political activism, he devoted much time on writings which carried a strong social message.

“Hear, ye man, my brother –
It is Man who represents Truth above all else
There is simply nothing that rises higher”¹²²

The above mentioned lines carry the message that Nazrul wanted to put across to all his readers and followers. He believed in equality, in treating every human being at par with each other. We shall discuss his social ideology as reflected in his writings on women, on caste and on social destitute. To begin with, we shall take a look at Nazrul’s writings on women in society.

¹¹⁹ *Raund Tebil Kanpharens*, ibid., vol.3, p. 222.

¹²⁰ *Amar Koifiyat*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 2 p. 133. Translated by Sajed Kamal.

¹²¹ *Bidrohiri Bani*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p.128.

¹²² Each issue of 'Langol' would carry at the top this strongly humanist dictum of Chandidas, the well known medieval Vaishnav poet. Translated by Rafiqul Islam.

Before we begin our discussion on Nazrul and his ideas on the status of women in the society, it would be useful to make a brief survey of how the women's issue was dealt with since early 19th century Bengal.

The inspiration for the 'women's movement' of the 19th century came from many sources. Extremely important among these were the efforts to bring about social reform. Rammohun Roy (1772 – 1833) and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820 – 1891) are invariably mentioned as champions of women's rights. While they voiced their opposition to certain customs, they were careful to explain the conflict between custom and traditional religious law. John Drinkwater Bethune¹²³ with the help of Vidyasagar, opened a school in 1849 to provide a secular education for girls; government grants-in-aid became available after 1854. The Brahmo Samaj supported schools and 'education at home' schemes; and members of the orthodoxy supported schools which would train girls (who arrived and left in closed carriages) in arithmetic, cooking and house-wifery and religion¹²⁴.

The first attempt to instruct Indian girls in Calcutta in organized schools, was made by the Calcutta Female Juvenile Society, which has subsequently assumed the name of the Calcutta Baptist Female Society for the establishment and support of native female schools¹²⁵. A report in 1834 showed that there was one school in Calcutta, with about 60 to 70 scholars; another at Chitpore, containing 110 to 120; and a third at Sibpore, in which 20 children of Indian converts were instructed¹²⁶.

¹²³ Col. John Drinkwater Bethune (1762 – 1844), was an English officer and military historian, and was well-known for promoting women's education in 19th-century Bengal. He established the Bethune College in 1849.

¹²⁴ Usha Chakraborty, *Conditions of Bengali Women around the Second Half of the 19th century*, Calcutta, 1963, pp.42-53. Chakraborty gives the following percentages for girls attending school from among the female population of school age: 1881-0.86%; 1891-1.6%; 1901-1.8%; 1910- 4.32%.

¹²⁵ William Adam, "Reports on the State of Education in Bengal (1835-1838) : Some Account of the State of Education in Bihar and a Consideration of the Means Adapted to the Improvement and Extension of Public Instruction in both Provinces", University of Calcutta, 1941, p. 46

¹²⁶ Ibid.

By 1879, the universities at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras had opened their doors to female candidates. The *Bamabodhini Patrika*, a magazine for women begun in 1864, gave encouragement to literary activity and provided a forum for news of women's welfare activities. The following year the Bramika Samaj was organized to bring Brahmo women together to discuss various topics for self-improvement¹²⁷. While widow remarriage never received popular approval, education for girls gradually gained acceptance. Until the mid-19th century the only girl's schools in Bengal were those run by the missionaries; in the second half of the century the opportunities were greatly expanded. But the social reform arguments on schools for girls and organizations for women never completely convinced the orthodox members of Hindu society that women had a place outside the home.

Swami Vivekananda (1863 – 1902) welcomed women devotees to Ramakrishna Mission and frequently expressed his thoughts on women's education. He greatly admired the education and mobility of American women, yet thought they lacked morality and spirituality. Indian women must be educated, he agreed, but through a system aimed at development of the 'ideal woman' with the virtues of purity, compassion, contentment, renunciation and service'¹²⁸. Thus, women would retain all the 'traditional' values while engaged in the study of science, civic work or social reforms¹²⁹.

With Hindu Revivalism came the firm conviction that one could serve God through 'social service'¹³⁰ or through service to motherland and the acceptance of the female as 'spiritually capable' of attaining great heights¹³¹. By this time the Brahmo Samaj and the Christian missionaries had educated a significant number of females, brought women into public life and had fitted them with clothing they might wear outside the

¹²⁷ Geraldine Forbes, *The Ideals of Indian Womanhood: Six Bengali Women during the independence Movement*, State University of New York: College of Oswego, 1975, p.61.

¹²⁸"Discourses and Lectures – Women of India", *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol.8, p. 225.

¹²⁹ Ibid. p.256.

¹³⁰ This is primarily and distinctly Swami Vivekananda's idea rather than of revivalism as a whole.

¹³¹ Geraldine Forbes, op.cit. p. 62.

home. The joining of the idea that women were the key to progress with the idea that a woman could be devoted to her country and work to free it without losing her traditional values was of great importance in bringing women into public life. Women entered the scene of nationalism, their members in active nationalist activity increased radically in 1920 and again in 1930 under Gandhi's leadership. Between 1905 and 1947 large numbers of Indian women participated in 'social service' organizations (for the amelioration and improvement of the lot of women) and political activities (picketing, marching, disobeying orders, and assisting revolutionary groups) without perceiving themselves as social, revolutionaries or being treated as such by society¹³².

The Bengali-Hindu women also took a lot of initiative to bring forth their opinions on issues relating to their dignity and integrity. Rassundari Devi's autobiography *Amar Jivan* (My Life), 1876, is an astonishing achievement¹³³. It was the first autobiography to be written in the Bengali language. Rassundari Devi was an ordinary housewife who taught herself to read and write in secret by scratching the letters of the alphabet onto a corner of the blackened kitchen wall. In her autobiography she described how upsetting it was for her to be introduced as her father's daughter¹³⁴. Since she lost her father very early in her life, she grew up thinking of herself as her mother's child. A persistent, almost tenacious sense of her individual identity, one that she struggles to hold onto in the most adverse of circumstances, is a striking feature of her narrative. She was very close to her mother and deeply resented that she had not been allowed to go to her, or care for her, when she lay dying. Had she been a man, Rassundari writes, surely she would not have been denied the right to fulfill this basic human duty.

Her autobiography is also an amazingly detailed account of the exhausting drudgery of the household work, which, especially after the children came along, was never over, day or night. Some critics have held her narrative up as a celebration of the patient and long-suffering Bengali housewife.

¹³² Ibid, p. 59.

¹³³ Susie J. Tharu, Ke Lalita, *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present. Vol.1 and Vol.2*, University of Chicago, Chicago, pp. 190- 201.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

Although she is relatively unknown today, Sarat Kumari Chaudhurani (1861-1920) was an important writer of her time and a great favorite of Rabindranath Tagore¹³⁵. Born into an eminent family in Calcutta, she spent much of her childhood in Lahore where her father, Shashibhusan Basu, was working. She was married to Akashary Chandra Chowdhary, a poet who had close links with the Tagore family. Sarat Kumari too developed a taste for literature and, with her husband's encouragement, began writing. Her best work, *Adorer na Anadorer*, was first published in 1891 in a contemporary journal, *Sadhana*. For its time, it is remarkable analysis of the neglect and abuse girls are subject to in a society that considers only the male as human. There are no male characters in the story and the main tensions arises between the older women, who are the principle agents of traditional society, and the younger ones, whose hopes and aspirations are already beginning to challenge the old order¹³⁶.

Even though her writing caused a stir in the literary world in her time, very little is known about Mokshodayani Mukhopadhyay's life. Her year of birth can be given approximately as 1848, but nothing is known of the circumstances or date of her death¹³⁷. The dearth of biographical detail is all the more significant when we consider that the author came from a well known family. In April of 1870, "Mokshodayani" released the first issue of "Banga Mahila"¹³⁸. It was intended as a newsletter, designed to support the exchange of information among women. It symbolized women's rights and vowed to fight for women's causes. In her article, 'Swadinata', she sheds light on what "real freedom" for women means and distinguishes it from the West influenced mannerisms and thought processes which more often than not passed as independent and free thinking for women but was nothing more than mere decadence. Her argument that what Western women had was not freedom, was based on her understanding of the situation and realizing that they had merely lost their dignity. She had a different opinion than the ones claiming that Bengali women were oppressed or were not liberal. Her argument was "What Bengali

¹³⁵ Susie J. Tharu, *Ke Lalita*, op.cit, pp. 262- 274.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Susie J. Tharu, *Ke Lalita*, op.cit, pp. 216- 219.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

women need is not freedom but access to higher education and a new style of dressing that would make it easier for them to move about in public”

The rise in development of literature in Bengali language and availability of Bengali educational material led to the wide range approval of education among middle-class women¹³⁹. When people opened their eyes to the new age “Bhadramahila” (respectable woman), who was not only well educated and culturally refined but was also a perfect fit while describing a homemaker, formal education was not only accepted but also became a major requisite for the women.¹⁴⁰ Education then was meant to inculcate in women the virtues – of orderliness, thrift, cleanliness and the responsibility to run the household in accordance to the contemporary rules put forward by the colonial world¹⁴¹.

This briefly sketches the story about the Bengali Hindu women; let us now discuss the state of the Bengali Muslim women in the society. Talking about the Bengali Muslim’s negotiation with modernity, most accounts speak of ‘backwardness’, where the Bengali Muslim ‘renaissance’ took place about 50 years after the Bengal Hindu ‘renaissance’. Women’s position remained a special marker of this backwardness. The early 20th century was celebrated as the period in which the Muslim community along with their women was awakened into modernity, through education, writing and publishing, social and political work and so on¹⁴². The place of women then has to be looked at from within this prism.

The figure of the Muslim woman was made to become the emblem of many contradictory elements. The Muslim woman had become the symbol of backwardness and mystery, simultaneously. Backwardness: because she was behind the veil, aloof from any vernacular or secular education. Secondly, her mystery revolved around her

¹³⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question*, in Kumkum Sangari & Suresh Vaid (ed) *Recasting Women*, New Delhi, Zubaan, 2006, p.246.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 247.

¹⁴² Sonia Nishat Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal: 1876-1939*, Brill Academic Press, Leyden, 1995.

potent sexuality hid behind the veil. For women to write and voice their own concerns, their feelings and emotions from within this site, which was loaded with meaning, became very difficult.

The 20th century saw a wide range of attempts at writings by the Bengali Muslim women in their struggle to carve out a space for themselves. To begin with, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein (1880-1932) had rightly become an iconic symbol for the awakening of Muslim-women. One of her most remarkable writings, *Streejatir Abanati* (1905)¹⁴³ (The Degradation of Women) spoke of women's enslavement. It called for liberty and freedom. The article argued that the enslaving devices were the women's very own ornaments, and the call to awakening was made to all group of women. Rokeya was well known for her protest against moribund social mores, where sometimes with humour as in *Abarodh Bashini*¹⁴⁴ (The Secluded Ones) and sometimes with reason and rationality, as in *Burqa* she pointed out the inequalities of the position of women. Fazilatunnesa (1905-1975), writing in *Freedom for Muslim Women* (*Saugat*, 1929), expressed it beautifully as the 'tumultuous winds (that) have managed to raise a flutter in the hearts of Muslim women who have been asleep for ages'- words of awakening echo in different forms throughout the writings of the Bengali Muslim women of that period¹⁴⁵. Image of women's backwardness was portrayed by all these women writers. Khairunnesa Khatun¹⁴⁶ widened the educational project to look at rural schools. She pointed towards many problems including the paucity of suitable female teachers and the lack of funds for such schools. The need for women's education was highlighted by every writer and what was brought out was not only an exhortation to send daughters to school, but the practical considerations of teachers, of resources, of the nature of the curriculum and so on.

¹⁴³ Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik, *Zenana Mehfil: Bangali Musalman Lekhikader Nirbachita Rachana: 1904-1938*, Stree Publication, Kolkata, 1998, p.35. This was originally published in the periodical, *Nabanoor* in 1905.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 37. This was originally published in *Masik Mohammadi* in different issues between 1927-1929

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p.219.

¹⁴⁶ Unfortunately Khairunnesa Khatun seems to have been totally forgotten. We have not been able to determine her birth and death dates. She was indeed a pioneer in women's education.

These writings were published in *Saugat* or *Nabanoor*, publications that promoted Muslim writers in Bengal. These women writers not only addressed the problems in the society but also tried to address the question of nation-building. By nation-building one is referring to the women's contribution in making the nation free from the shackles of the colonial rule. Khairunnesa in her essay translated as *For the Love of the Motherland* (*Nabanoor*, 1905), called on her sisters to sacrifice for the motherland. She further stated that sacrificing life for the Motherland is the most valued act in any woman's life. She brought in the example of kshatriya women of the past and exhorted women to give up British and European goods, their finery and ornaments, for the 'resurrection of India's dormant industries'¹⁴⁷. An image of a wider nation, going beyond community and sometimes even class, is drawn, and the place of women within that nation is debated and a feeling given that women have to ensure their place within the new nation.

These concerns were perhaps best encapsulated in the excerpt from *A Woman's Responsibility towards the Village Community* (*Gulistan*, 1933) by Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua (1906-1977), where women's responsibility to life outside the home is highlighted. Women were encouraged to carve out their own niche in politics, in their decision making power. Interestingly enough, the essay began with a quotation from the Koran¹⁴⁸. The debate on 'women and nation' became a part of the discussion in women's writings during the period.

In an early Sanskrit text of fifth/sixth century AD we get a reference to the presiding deity of Bharat well famed as the *Bharatmata* (Mother India). To her north is the Himalaya and Kanyakumari in the south is forever present. Prayer to this great Shakti frees men from re-birth, (*Samavidhana Brahman*). This ancient redeeming image of the Bharat Mata as the presiding deity Shakti is taken up in a big way in the nationalist phase of Bengal¹⁴⁹. The mother image is drawn as much from the

¹⁴⁷ Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik, op.cit., p. 63.

¹⁴⁸ 'If you want to satisfy me, then satisfy the poor and deprived people' - Koran Sharif. Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik, *Women in Concert: An Anthology of Bengali Muslim Women's Writings*, Stree Publication, Kolkata, 2008, p. 233.

¹⁴⁹ Jasodhara Bagchi, *Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherland in Colonial Bengal*, EPW, 20-27 October, 1990.

mainstream religious worship of the Hindus as from their local religious practices and folktales¹⁵⁰.

However, by the time of Civil Disobedience movement the change in attitude towards women's participation had already taken place. We see an attempt made to bring women into the forefront of the political activities or at the public forum by both the communities. Let us now see how Nazrul engages with the existing scenario.

Nazrul took positions that supported the idea of ensuring social equality for women. So, while one will find him advocating (on behalf of women) the political, economic, and social rights, we must look beyond such findings to the cultural focus of his poetic outpourings. Nazrul challenges us to review our own history. In that review, he informs us that while the source of human grief, pain, or evil has been attributed to women, an accurate assessment would disclose that men and women shared it equally.

He was more interested in uprooting the structure of what some scholars have come to call the 'figured world' – that "socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretations in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others"¹⁵¹. It is this 'figured world' that interacts with (and often out of which we have) the world of narratives; it is also the world which gives rise to certain 'core values' and belief systems. In attacking the system of beliefs and its underlying narrative, Nazrul hoped not simply to discredit the belief and its associated narrative, but, as well, to create a new 'figured world'. A 'figured world' in which women are recognized, their contributions are given their merited significance, and the outcomes of their actions are assigned to their proper values. Hence we find him emphasizing-

“Every great victory, every great adventure,
Has been ennobled by sacrifices
Made by mothers, sisters and wives.
History records the names of men
Who have been killed in wars

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Dorothy Holland, et al., *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, Harvard University Press, 1998, p.52.

But not the women who have been widowed.
 Does anybody inscribe on a heroes monument
 All the mothers who sacrifice their hearts,
 All the sisters who offered their services?
 Never in history has man's sword
 Earned victory by itself.
 Inspiration and strength have come
 From the goddess of victory – woman”¹⁵²!

Nazrul's emphasis on the humanizing and the softening influence of woman on the society is also remarkable. To him, men were generally harsh, often heartless, lacking in affections and in a refined inner sense of beauty. Women, on the other hand, generally possessed the opposite attributes. Women neutralized some of the effects of men's psychic and spiritual constitution. Having given his attention to history, belief systems, figured universes, and certain assumed attributes of the psychic and spiritual constitution of men and women, Nazrul turned to some specific social/cultural practices that, to him, imprisoned women. Nazrul was after something more radical for women. He used the limitations within which the socio-cultural and the communal practices had confined women to construct the image of slavery and imprisonment. In his words:

“Tell me, woman, which tyrant
*Put you in this prison-palace
 of gold and silver ornaments?*
 You don't show eagerness to express yourself,
 Cowardly you murmur behind the screen.
 You can't look straight into one's eyes
*You've bangles on your wrists,
 anklets around your feet.*
 Tear open your veil, woman,
 Break your chains into pieces!
 Cast away the veil that turned you into a coward!
 Get rid of all your marks of slavery,
 All your ornaments”¹⁵³

Wearing bangles and other ornaments are a form of aesthetic expression in which many women have engaged. But Nazrul felt that these forms of aesthetic expression were not of women's making or choosing; they were, in his view, from the socially

¹⁵² *Nari*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 5, p.118. Translated by Basudha Chakrabarty.

¹⁵³ *Nari*, op.cit., Vol.5, p.118. Emphasis added.

and culturally dominant world of men, who prescribed the veil and dictated how women should dress, how they should feel, and how they should be. The tyranny, the prison, and the slavery of these practices should be overthrown. Nazrul wanted to see a day where –

“That day is not far off
when the world shall sing the glory of woman
along with that of man”¹⁵⁴

One should keep in my mind here that Nazrul did not put forward the message that one should neglect the men to give respect only to the women. Rather he believed in giving an equal status to both.

In an article, Nazrul portrayed the role of a mother in a child’s life. In his ‘Jananeeder Prati’¹⁵⁵ (To Mothers), Nazrul spoke about the responsibilities of a mother in making her child walk. Nazrul’s emphasis was completely on the way the mother made her child walk, made the child see the world. In other words, Nazrul portrayed a woman’s role in building the back-bone of the nation- the youth. In this essay Nazrul not only spoke of the woman as a mother but also portrayed her as the Mother Nature. Nature holds the supreme power and all human-beings have to bow their heads before her. Nazrul shocked all of his readers with his poem ‘Barangana’¹⁵⁶ (Prostitute) (1926) where he addressed the prostitute as a mother.

“Who calls you a prostitute, Mother?
You may not be chaste,
Yet you are one of the family
Of all our mothers and sisters.
Your sons are like any of us,
Who are the bigots
Who condescendingly label your son as an ‘illegitimate’ child?
In this world children are not always born,
purely out of the purpose of procreation,
But out of lust! So, listen, religious leaders:

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ *Jananeeder Prati*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.7, p.612.

¹⁵⁶ *Barangana*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.2, p.80. Translated by Basuddha Chakrabarty in *Kazi Nazrul Islam*, NBT, Delhi.

There's no difference between 'illegitimate' and 'legitimate' children!
And if the son of an unchaste mother is 'illegitimate',
So is the son of an unchaste father"¹⁵⁷

Here again Nazrul spreads the message of equality for the woman who has been considered as an outcaste in the society. He gave the prostitute the most respectable position and called her children a part of the larger family in the society. However, this position was taken earlier this in Bengali society. Much before Nazrul, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa said that his view of woman as Mother was not limited to his companion Sarada Devi and he recognized the mother even in the most degraded prostitutes. A startling element was added to the circle of women devotees of Ramakrishna after his visit to Girish Ghosh's play *Chaitanya-Lila* (1884). The holy man blessed Binodini for her performance as the young Chaitanya: the man who normally abhorred feminine contact allowed actresses, recruited from among prostitutes, to touch his feet¹⁵⁸.

Not only did Nazrul talk of the equality of the women but also challenged the religious leaders in the society who questioned the very legitimacy of the children by the prostitutes. This amounts to giving the woman a new respect but also to overcome threats from her sexuality. 'Jago Nari Jago'¹⁵⁹ (Rise up Women), is the most remarkable Nazrul song on awakening women. Written on the occasion of the inauguration of a Ladies' club in Calcutta in 1931, this is one of the most reputed Bengali songs on women. It was not possible to make any struggle a success be it against the British subjugation or the exploitation of laboring masses argued Nazrul, without the participation of women. Nazrul, therefore, urged the womenfolk to come forward and participate in socio-political movements. Nazrul's song reminds us of the above discussed nationalist opinion on the women's participation in the freedom struggle. Similar to their opinion, Nazrul too portrayed the woman as the Mother Goddess, as a replica of 'Kali' and 'Durga'. He freely used religious symbolism to portray the strong woman was then commonly done among nationalists. A few lines would illustrate:

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. Translated by Basuddha Chakrabarty.

¹⁵⁸ Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, OUP, New Delhi, 2009, p. 340

¹⁵⁹ *Jago Nari Jago*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.2, p.209

“Rise up women – rise up like the flaming fire!
Rise up, O wife of the sun-god,
With the mark of blood on your forehead!!
Like the fire blazing out of a smoke heap,
Rise up – all you mothers, daughters, wives, sisters!
Redeemers of the sinners, the fallen-
Like the flowing Ganges-rise up, all you downtrodden;
Fill the clouds with blazing thunder, O women-
The ever victorious- awaken in you the goddess Durga”¹⁶⁰

Much before Nazrul, even Bankim made efforts to place the women characters in his novels at par with their male counterparts. Some of Bankim’s female characters were well-educated. Radharani (a novel by that name), had a personal library; Tilottama (in *Durgeshnandini*) could read Jaideb and Kalidas in the original, Prafulla (in *Devi Chaudhurani*) was instructed in the Vedanta, and Suryamukhi (in *Bishbriksha*) learned English from a European governess. On the whole, Bankim’s construction of female characters was superior to that of the male¹⁶¹. Bankim Chandra was quick to condemn any unjust acts carried out on her. Thus, in *Devi Chaudhurani*, even after his father forced him to desert his wife, Prafulla, Brojeswar was made to realize that there were few things as precious as a good wife¹⁶². In *Krishna Kanter Will* too, the novelist was on the side of the wronged woman, Bhramar, who had the courage to say that her respect for her husband would be in place only so long as he was worthy of that respect¹⁶³. In his day, it was perhaps Bankim, more than any fellow writer of his generation, who asserted that the woman and wife were objects of respect. Even the representation of woman in the Mother-India cult or the Mother Goddess was pre-empted by Bankim. Nazrul adopted and carried forward this legacy.

Nazrul’s view on the position of women was in tandem with the nationalist view, be it discarding the ornaments, or the call for equality. Nazrul portrayed a balanced figure of a woman. The woman while being a good mother was also to participate in the

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. Translated by Sajed Kamal.

¹⁶¹ Amiya P. Sen, *Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay: An Intellectual Biography*, OUP, New Delhi, 2008, p. 66.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 67.

various movements. And in Nazrul's love poems the woman was also portrayed beautifully as the lover. Nazrul was able to portray the woman in her totality, the mother, the lover and the active and equal participant in socio-political movements.

Nazrul's writings on Caste:-

For any historical analysis of Indian social evolution, it is difficult to ignore the all-encompassing influence of caste principles on the social milieu. The caste system codified the norms of social conduct for the Hindus and also endowed them with a social organization. The organizational framework provided by caste, therefore, had a profound impact on any social or political movement involving the masses.

In Bengal, as in other parts of India, caste system in a considerable way determined the patterns of social relationship among the Hindus, as the manner of interaction between two individuals depended on their respective caste status. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay in *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal – 1872-1937*, argues that the caste system in Bengal was relatively flexible and its internal dynamism sustained it through ages by successfully absorbing and neutralizing the tensions from below. A process of change is supposed to have set in with the coming of the British. Colonial rule released certain forces that tended to threaten the very fundamentals on which stood the traditional society. The spread of education, the impact of western liberal ideas and a growing urban industrial culture so seriously threatened the traditional social milieu that many individuals and associations in the 19th century Bengal had started believing that caste system would wither away automatically.¹⁶⁴

But this expected collapse never took place. Even in the third decade of the 20th century more than 99 per cent of the Bengali Hindus mentioned their caste status when the census enumerators knocked at their doors¹⁶⁵. This was mainly because the so called leveling influences of the colonial rule, instead of pulling out the individuals from the primordial social aggregates, had in fact led to a rejuvenation of such social

¹⁶⁴ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj, Bengal: 1872-1937*, K.P. Bagchi & Company, Calcutta, 1990, pp. 12-13.

¹⁶⁵ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Bengal: Rethinking History, Essays in Historiography*, International Centre for Bengal Studies, Dhaka, 2001, pp. 238-9.

ties¹⁶⁶. Newer developments made caste lose its ritual content (though never completely) and became more and more secularized as a focal point for political mobilization. But these lower caste movements were not always mere responses to colonial inducements. While the leaders felt attracted to such institutional benefits, the masses were often imbued with a spirit of protest against material deprivation and social humiliation, or as Kathleen Gough have put it, 'with a desire for ethnic freedom'¹⁶⁷. A number of caste organizations came up but the illiterate and ignorant masses not only remained outside these organizations, but, as in some areas of Bengal, recently explored by Sudhir Chakraborti, lived in an autonomous mental world, which even repudiated caste system under the leveling influence of certain radically liberal local religious sects'¹⁶⁸. Thus a caste association did not always represent the ideas and aspirations of an entire community.

True, their leaders could not ultimately utilize the protest mentality of the masses to bring about any radical social change, and themselves got embroiled in council politics or faction-fighting. But in the process, caste under colonial state's tutelage was made into political formation or, indeed, an interest group in the organized institutional politics in Bengal. During the early and mid 20th century, caste went through a process of politicization, which was conditioned essentially by the colonial context. Nazrul on the other hand did not see 'caste' as a political formation, which is what we can infer from his writings. He addressed it only as a social category and a social problem. His writings were more concerned to make the people aware of their equal status. To achieve what he desired, Nazrul never preached for a political organization neither did he call for any formation of a caste 'Dal' (group). Nazrul highlighted only the oppression meted out to these lower sections of the society. In other words, one can say that Nazrul was not embroiled in the elite politics of caste mobilization but concerned himself with the issue of the suffering of the masses under caste discrimination. This is another illustration of Nazrul's humanitarian and egalitarian approach to the society. The writings on caste could also be related to

¹⁶⁶ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj*, p. 12.

¹⁶⁷ As quoted in, *Ibid*, p.13

¹⁶⁸ As quoted in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's *Caste, Politics, and the Raj* - from Sudhir Chakraborti's *Sahebdhani Sampraday O Tader Gaan*, Calcutta, 1986.

Nazrul's personal experiences with the practice. We have already discussed some related incidents in the first chapter itself. A closer look at Nazrul's writing on this particular issue will give us a clearer picture of his ideology.

Nazrul's protest against the caste system was best recorded in his famous poem¹⁶⁹ 'Jater Bajjati' (Wickedness of Caste, July 1923). Apart from focusing on the usual inhumanity and caste system, Nazrul emphasized his position that caste has prevented national unity in India. He was thus able to get at one of the central role of caste as engineered by the colonial state.

“This is all wickedness in the name of caste,
you caste impostors are playing this gamble:
you say you will lose your caste if I touch you?
But caste is not a morsel of food in the hands of a child
that it would get lost!
That's why, Oh stupid, you broke a single nation
Into hundred pieces!
There's no man today, only the howls of
The jackals of caste”¹⁷⁰

He also identified the caste prejudice as one of the major reasons of India's abject subservience to foreigners:

“To demean the power within man
by putting custom above everything else;
It is for this sin that you're being captured
by Uncle Lion (i.e. Imperialist Britain)”¹⁷¹

In the same poem, he deplored the authority of Manu (the ancient law giver who institutionalized the caste system by codifying its rules), whom Nazrul discounted only as an atom in the enormity of the universe¹⁷².

¹⁶⁹ It is quite surprising to note that Nazrul was not criticized by his Hindu contemporaries for his writings on caste. At least there has not been any wide ranging recorded criticism of Nazrul on this. A Hindu reaction to a Muslim's writing on caste was highly likely.

¹⁷⁰ *Jater Bajjati*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p. 121. Translated by Basudha Chakraborty.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

Unlike many others, Nazrul understood the caste prejudice to be at the root of the Hindu communalism against the Muslims and others. In 'Chhutmarga' (Untouchability) (an editorial in the daily *Nabojug*, 1920) Nazrul identified untouchability as the chief obstacle in the way of Hindu-Muslim unity and called for its quick eradication in the interest of building an all-Indian nation. He declared that untouchability had weakened the vast Hindu community beyond measure. As a remedy, he urged that young crusaders against this social evil work vigorously among the people emphasizing humanity over all caste and religious identities and applying physical force, if necessary, against the elements of reaction¹⁷³.

Nazrul attacked the caste prejudices in a number of satirical poems such as 'Jater Jantikal'¹⁷⁴ (The Mouse Trap of Caste), 'De Gorur Ga Dhuiye'¹⁷⁵ (Wash the Cow's Body, 1931), and 'Sarda-Bill'¹⁷⁶ (The Sarda Bill, 1931). In 'Jater Jantikal', Nazrul wittily represented the Indian society. He depicted how on one hand India was witnessing social and technological changes and on the other hand there were people (especially Hindus) who still practiced the caste system. And in between were the downtrodden who were experiencing incomparable awakening. Therefore, the inevitable consequence was a general collapse of the whole system leading to a socio-economic revolution, as contemplated in the serious poem 'Shudrer Majhe Jagiche Rudro'¹⁷⁷ [Rudra (god of destruction) is emerging from among the Shudras, 1930]. Nazrul in this poem tries to call upon all the ritually marginalized castes (the sweepers, cobblers, fisher men, the farmers etc) in the Hindu society to come together and break away all the caste shackles which had bound them for ages. He repeated the attack against Manu in *Soty-Mantra* (1924) where he declared the laws of Manu to be as momentary as the weapons of a king, and urged the people to disobey both in favour of truth which is pure and simple as well as natural and divine. He has

¹⁷³ *Chhutmarga*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p. 430.

¹⁷⁴ *Jater Jantikal*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.4, p.78

¹⁷⁵ *De Gorur Ga Dhuiye*, op.cit.

¹⁷⁶ *Sarda Bill*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.3, p.213

¹⁷⁷ *Shudrer Majhe Jagiche Rudro*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 4, p.54

beautifully depicted the plight of the individual in the midst of such plural authorities in a long song titled 'Sotyo-Mantra' (Hymn of Truth, 1924):

“Risis are many, so are their opinions indeed.
Whose authority will you obey?
How many of them can you please?
If you obey (the rules of) one society
The other will banish you.
Chains and bondages all around”¹⁷⁸

On the Poor and the Downtrodden:-

As a poet and writer, Nazrul ardently carried the ideals of socio-economic righteousness and the underlying message in all his writing was the desire to create a 'just' society. Most of his admirers and contemporaries interpreted this ideology of his to be revolutionary. Nazrul consciously combined his advocacy of a mutual respect for various religions, with a promotion of financial parity. Nazrul's body of work made it clear that if there were two messages that he wanted his readers to follow, those were – “communal harmony” and “united class struggle” –carried forward by joint effort of the labouring classes of Hindu and Muslim communities against the upper classes. On this aspect there was a noteworthy distinction between Nazrul Islam's ideology and that of Mahatma Gandhi, the INC leader with whom he shared a deep commitment to Hindu-Muslim amity.

In fighting landlordism or exploitation of industrial workers Nazrul did not hesitate to champion class struggle while Gandhi would employ other means such as Satyagraha. In fact, the poet is known to have pioneered efforts towards the politicization of Bengal's peasants and workers, in particular from 1925-1926 onwards. Through the essay 'Dharmaghat' ('Strike'), the poet conveyed his pledge to the labouring peasants in such emphatically that they continue to be spoken by social activists in Bangladesh today:

“The peasants who during the whole year undertake backbreaking physical labour, while removing the sweat from their forehead with their arms, cannot even eat two full meals of boiled rice. Except for a rag reaching down to his knees, he does not even avail of one proper

¹⁷⁸ *Sotyo Mantra*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p.123. Translated by Basuddha Chakrabarty.

dress (piran) through all his life... But the lord who takes his paddy rice spends twelve months under a royal (nawabi) roof, enjoying one after the other festival”¹⁷⁹.

Besides his concern for peasants’ struggles, Nazrul earnestly felt for the struggles of daily labourers. A distinctive poem is “Kuli-Mazur”, (Coolies and Labourers), where he incorporates images which are recognizable from other poetic literatures on “class exploitation” into an image perceived from India’s “religio-cultural” traditions. He called the labourers who built steam engines ‘*dadhichis*’- , a reference to the mythical sage by that name who allowed a deadly weapon to be crafted out of his own bones that was used to slay a fearsome devil. Further he makes use of the same metaphor recounting how the labourers used their tools to and hammered and shoveled their way into the mountains and paved the way for the roads; and yet their “bones now lie scattered on both sides of the road”¹⁸⁰. On the oppression of the labouring classes by the well to do he wrote –

“The other day on the train
I saw a *Babu Sahib* striking down a coolie.
Tears burst into my eyes.
Should the weak – the world over – go on
Getting beaten like this?
Just look at the steam engines – built
by the hard labour of the *Dadhichis*.
Now the *Babu Sahibs* ride on them
While the coolies fall under them”¹⁸¹

Nazrul articulates his belief that there will soon be a time when the workers will rise and make even the heavens smile and “evil in fear”. Once again Nazrul uses religious images to reinforce the workers’ trust in themselves. Nazrul’s writings effectively reveal his combined commitment to equality between members of different religions, with an equally strong commitment to the struggles of Bengal’s laboring population for social and economic equality. However, having said this, a question naturally comes to mind that wouldn’t this frequent use of Hindu religious imagery serve to divide Hindu workers from Muslims even when Nazrul’s idea was to create a

¹⁷⁹ *Dharmaghat*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1. p.423. Translated by Rafiqul Islam.

¹⁸⁰ *Kuli-Majur*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.2, p. 86

¹⁸¹ *Kuli-Majur*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.2, p. 86. Translated by Sajed Kamal in *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Selected Works*, p. 45

common class struggle? The question though remains unanswered as there has not been any such recorded criticism of Nazrul coming from the laboring classes of Muslims or Hindus. On the other hand, the orthodox Muslims always criticized Nazrul's drawing of examples from Hindu mythology, an aspect I look at in the next chapter.

Many songs and poems of Nazrul communicate his desire for an egalitarian society. In Nazrul's view Of the two great pillars of the social liberation, one was the political liberation in the form of freedom from the clutches of British domination and the other was the economic freedom for the weaker sections of the society made up of the laboring people who had been exploited through ages. In other words Nazrul took up both the 'National' and the 'Social' question. He desired a social order free from exploitation. On the question of economic liberty Nazrul Islam was inspired by the idea of socialism. As discussed earlier, he was first imbibed with this spirit during his stay at the Karachi barracks when he heard of the socialist revolution in Russia. Nazrul never took an active interest in the Marxist theory. But he never hesitated to take part in any activity which he believed to be related to upholding the causes of the toiling people. Nazrul's support to socialism did not have an orthodox 'party line' following jargon filled character. He focused on the heart of the socialist idea – dignity of the common man, an egalitarian society. And he did so with a poet's empathy and brilliance.

'Sarbohara' (The Have-nots) (1926) book of verse by Nazrul is termed as being the first of its type in Bengali language envisaging the rise and victory of working people. 'Krishaner Gan', (The Song of Peasants), 'Sramiker Gan' (The Song of the Labourers), 'Dhibarer Gan' (The Song of Fishermen), - all included in the 'Sarbohara' volume reflected Nazrul's sentiments in favour of broad based awakening among the working people who had been exploited throughout the ages. Some lines from 'The Song of the Peasant' read like this:-

"Rise up O cultivators, inhabitants of the earth,
Hold up your plough strong,
We are about to die –
Let us die a befitting death,
Our courtyard was full of corns
The country was full of smile,

The robbers of that trading country
Have put us to endless distress
The water of seven seas has turned
Saline with tears of our mother”¹⁸²

In yet another song, ‘Sramik-er Gaan’ (The Song of the Labourers) which was sung by Nazrul himself at the inauguration of the second session of the All Bengal Peasants’ Congress held in February, 1926. He made a fervent appeal to the working people to organize themselves and fight for their legitimate rights. He wrote:

“O travelers along the way to doom
Hold your hammer and put the
Iron bar on your shoulder
We have built at ease with our hands
And let us demolish it under our feet”¹⁸³

‘The Song of the Fishermen’, was also sung by Nazrul Islam as the inaugural song of the third session of the Fishermen’s Conference held in Madaripur, then a sub-divisional town under the district of Faridpur, in March, 1926¹⁸⁴. With all such songs Nazrul tried his best to usher a new awareness among the working people and urged them to unite and fight against exploitation.

Nazrul brilliantly brings out the desperation that poverty leads to and yet hold out hope in the capacity of the poor to resist. His ‘Mrityu Khudha’¹⁸⁵(1930) shows the power of death, it shows how poverty, disease and hopeless love affected one’s life. But, characteristically, and expectedly, Nazrul Islam has shown how life was much more noble and powerful than death. A hunger for life is supreme fact in life of those who are dying; and in their cruel desire to live the poor are prepared to do anything that they find necessary. To them religion was not important as it was to the middle-classes. His depiction of poverty in this novel coincided with his famous poem

¹⁸² *Krishaker Gan*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.2, p.120. Translated by Sajed Kamal

¹⁸³ *Sramiker Gan*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.2, p.121. Translated by Sajed Kamal

¹⁸⁴ Serajul Islam Choudhury, *Nazrul Islam: Poet and More*, Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, 1994, p.66.

¹⁸⁵ *Mrityu Khudha*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.3. p. 363-452

'Daridra'¹⁸⁶ (Poverty, 1927). 'Daridra' is a painful projection of poverty which leaves a deep impact on the reader. It seems to be written out of Nazrul's own experience of poverty since his childhood. Poverty, he says, had made him great. It had turned his blooming heaven into a desert; but also given him Christ-like eminence, the undaunted courage of unabashed expression. The poet looks far from scared; he accepts the reality of poverty with a remarkable candidness. Particularly moving is an image set at the heart of the poem- that of the poet's depiction of starving children weeping around their helpless father. Nazrul Islam turned poverty into an extraordinary rich material for evocative poetry.

His ideology of equality came from his own experiences and reflection and not only from any academic study of Marxism. His political participation with the Workers' and Peasants' Party of Bengal, based on the socialist ideology, has been discussed on the chapter on his political ideology. Nazrul's personal experience with the hardships of life was constantly reflected in his writings. Nazrul's sense of social equality came not from reading socialist literature but from an intuitive sense of justice and fair-play. An ideology which strives to bring equality amongst all classes in society was the most attractive for Nazrul. He did not allow communist ideology to narrow down his poetic imagination to strict doctrinaire straightjackets. Had he done so he would not, for example, have used religious imagery to put across his ideas. The Utopian society that Nazrul dreamt off was difficult to categorize within the theoretical limits of any doctrinaire ideology.

We have till now discussed what constituted Nazrul's social and political ideology. Nazrul initially was receptive to the dominant trend in Bengal, the revolutionary-extremist trend, and later went on shifted to Left ideology. Nazrul used provocative language but that was not something different to the on-going trend. Then why do we call him a 'rebel'? Nazrul stands different amongst his contemporaries as he chose poetry to voice his anger. The politicians and the social activists of his time were not poets. Being a poet and yet being so politically active made him stand out from the rest. In my opinion however, to an extent Nazrul's anti-imperialist writings can be put

¹⁸⁶ *Daridrya*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.3, p. 60

under the category of ‘rebellious’ writings¹⁸⁷, but that alone does not make him a ‘rebel’. There were other sides to him which shall be discussed in the following section.

¹⁸⁷ Anti-colonial sentiment can be categorized as one form of rebellion. But this was a form of rebellion which all our freedom fighters took to. Then how can Nazrul be singled out with a ‘rebellious’ sentiment?

Chapter – 4

A Sadhaka¹, a Bhakta² or a Pir³ - The Other Side of Nazrul Islam

In this chapter we see our ‘rebel’ poet in a ‘religious’ light. Nazrul’s religious compositions have been loved and critiqued equally and they often do not find a place in his biographies. Even if they do, they are not discussed critically. Nazrul’s songs to Kali, Uma, Krishna and Muhammad are evaluated on the basis of their popularity. Many of the poet’s biographers claim, that Nazrul revolutionized the genre of religious songs. They say this because a Muslim composed songs on Hindu deities and also because of his songs on Islamic themes, the *Islami gaan*. But none have tried to see if there had been an existing tradition of Islamic songs, especially in praise of the Prophet, or the existing tradition of Muslim *pirs/fakirs* singing Hindu mythological songs. The spirit of Nazrul’s idea of religion lay in inter-faith collaborations, for which he has often been denounced. There are some questions that we ought to raise while we discuss Nazrul’s stand on religion and the public-space. Questions like – from intense political activism what made him switch to religious songs? Was he religious or spiritual? Or was he religious and not dogmatic? Did Nazrul set a new trend in religious writings (both Hindu and Islamic) or was he merely following his predecessors? Did his audience/listeners influence his way of delivering the songs? This chapter also makes an attempt (though briefly) to trace the history of ideas about Bengali goddesses and Prophet’s piety.

Anthony Copley in his excellent work⁴ talks about the art of composing music, especially spiritual music. The principal theme of his work was to find if the composers were ‘spiritually’ motivated. In his work Copley closely reads the personal life experiences of the composers and their artistic engagements. He then problematizes the question of spiritual compositions in relation to music especially

¹ *Sadhaka* is related to the Sanskrit work – *Sadhu* meaning a ‘seeker’. The word usually refers to a spiritual aspirant.

² *Bhakta* means a devotee, a religious devotee in this case.

³ The term *Pir* refers to a Muslim saint or a holy man.

⁴ Anthony Copley, *Music and the Spiritual: Composers and Politics in the 20th Century*, Primus Books, Delhi, 2013.

during the twentieth century Nazism and Communism. Anthony Copley argues that artists and composers could not escape the evils in the society and responded through their music. Copley's survey includes musicians and artists from Russia, Eastern Europe, France and Germany. He tries through his study to establish the relationship between the political and the artist. Anthony Copley argues that the artist's or composer's tryst with failing health issues, death, sexuality, confronting the dehumanizing face of politics brought the composers face to face with spirituality. These conditions in the public and private sphere either made the artists accept religion/spirituality or out rightly reject it. Copley's work has shown the relationship of history and politics with artistic reflection. Could Nazrul's turn to spirituality be seen as part of such a trend?

Devotional songs or *bhaktigeeti* are broadly understood as songs of spiritual inspiration. They are also termed as '*dharmasangeet*' because they are written and sung in praise of god. Nazrul Islam composed devotional songs on a very large scale. His contribution to this field of Bengali songs is certainly great, so much so that he is regarded as one of the principal composers of Bengali devotional songs. On a rough estimate his devotional songs would come to be about 725 songs⁵. These were songs on gods and goddesses, the messengers of god, religious rites and festivals.

The devotional songs of Kazi Nazrul Islam may be divided into two groups. The first group of songs may be termed as Islamic songs and the second group of songs may be termed as the Hindu religious songs. The first group consists of songs on Allah, Hazrat Muhammad, Islamic rites and festivals. The other group consists of songs on Hindu gods and goddesses, messengers of god and rites as envisaged in Hinduism. We, therefore, see that both Islam and Hinduism served as the sources of inspiration for him to compose songs and nowhere in the works of any other Bengali composer had these two religious trends been so intimately combined⁶. Nazrul's place in this respect in the history of Bengali songs is unique.

⁵ Karunamaya Goswami, *Aspects of Nazrul Songs*, Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, 1999, p.144.

⁶ Buddhadev Basu, *An Acre of Green Grass: A Review of Modern Bengali Literature*, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1948, p. 134.

Nazrul brought about a revolution in the genre of devotional songs and poetry. What set Nazrul's work apart from his contemporaries was his flair for the unusual, but also employing worldly metaphors and a constructive religious imagination that fused ideas and imageries from diverse cultures and religion.

However, before we critically evaluate Nazrul, we ought to have an idea what his predecessors contributed to this genre of devotional songs. Only then we would understand how far Nazrul was similar or different from them. Let us first begin with the genre of Hindu religious songs. At the very outset I would like to clarify that my research here is not as a musicologist but as a historian. I nowhere would indulge in examining the rhythm or music of what Nazrul composed. Rather my attempt here would be to examine the cultural and historical context in which he wrote and see his contribution in the larger spectrum of religious writings in 19th – 20th century Bengal.

Sakta⁷ Singers and Composers before Nazrul Islam –

The Hindu religious songs could be further classified under three broad categories – first, the Shyama sangit (songs devoted to goddess Kali or Shyama), second - the *Uma sangit* (songs devoted to goddess Durga) and third - the *Vaishnav pada* (songs devoted to Radha-Krishna love lore). Uma sangit could be further divided into two sub-categories – first, *agamani* songs, second – *bijaya* songs.

The tradition of writing ‘sung poetry’ to Shyama Ma (goddess Kali) originated in the eighteenth century in Bengal. The earliest *Sakta* poets appear to have been associated with the urban elite – either those whose traditional court lifestyles soon became threatened by political instability of the region, or those whose fortunes were rising, principally in the British settlement of Calcutta⁸. It has often been argued that the basic reason for the rise of *Sakta* poetry was suffering. Many scholars have interpreted the tearful cries of devotion and all the complaints to the goddess as the sufferings of the common people⁹. However, one needs to keep in mind that *Sakta* poetry was not

⁷ Genre of singers in Bengal, who dedicated their songs to goddesses like Kali and Durga

⁸ Rachel Fell McDermott, *Mother of My Heart, Daughter of My Dreams – Kali and Uma in the Devotional Poetry of Bengal*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001, p. 15

⁹ Maybe this is what draws Nazrul to this type of poetry.

essentially a creation of the common people. A closer look at the Sakta poetry and its patrons could tell us a different story. It becomes clear at great many instances that the deliberate adoption of the *Sakta* deities by several landowning affluent families was an attempt to claim royal identities. The zamindars demonstrated their interest in *sakti* not only sponsoring goddess-centered festivals; they also built temples, both to represent their wealth and to help consolidate their influence¹⁰.

Among Nazrul's predecessors writing Sakta poetry, we shall discuss three – Ramprasad Sen, Kamalakanta Bhattacharya and Mahendranath Bhattacharya. Ramprasad Sen (1718-1775) was a poet, *sadhaka*, *bhakta* and literary protégé of the head of Nadia zamindar estates, Maharaja Krishnachandra Ray. Long recognized as the premier Bengali Sakta poet, he was famed for his literary talent, devotion to the goddess, spiritual powers, and ability to inspire. Ramprasad was a talented poet of Vaidya caste and his father was also a poet, a scholar and even a doctor¹¹. The second in our list is poet Kamalakanta (1769 – 1821). Without exception all Bengali literary critics consider him the second ranking figure. Most of Kamalakanta's biographers portray him as a follower of Ramprasad, both poetically and in lifestyle. The major works on Kamalakanta between 1857 and 1913 were initiated by his patrons, the Burdwan royal family, and reflect their concern with his roles as they had experienced them, poet and advisor¹². Kamalakanta's biographers have given him a social elevation in three stages, from a *kavi* to a *bhakta* to a *sadhaka*. His life events have been narrated with an extra pinch of divinity and spirituality – the dark goddess visits him, she enables him to change the course of nature and finally she grants him the power of prediction.

Both Ramprasad and Kamalakanta have a number of striking similarities, which helps Rachael McDermott conclude – “(i) both are accosted by murderous dacoits whom they convert through song (ii) sing a variant of Kali “Kali you have removed all my difficulties!” at the death of a loved one (iii) find that their wives have received food

¹⁰ Rachael McDermott, *op.cit*, p. 32.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.42.

¹² *Ibid*. p.85.

from Kali while they were engaged in spiritual practices (iv) turn the new moon into full moon in the presence of their patrons (v) express ambivalence towards the spiritual benefits of visiting the physical city Kashi (vi) are criticized for their practice of drinking wine and (vii) perform a miracle of liquid transformation (water to wine and wine to milk) in the context of their self-justification (viii) the biographers of both evince some discomfort in explicating their type of Tantric practices”¹³. Both Ramprasad and Kamalakanta extolled Kali’s association with the Brahman, her identity with Krishna. They believed that goddess Kali had an ability to subsume all other divinities within her. In many of their poems, the poets tried to emphasize the Sakta view of ultimate unity.

Kamakanta and Ramprasad are typical in yet another way. Both these Sakta poets belonged to a higher caste. At least 95 of the 113 names in the 1942 Sakta Padabali anthology are from the three highest caste grouping in Bengal: Brahman, Vaidya and Kayastha¹⁴. The first group consisted of the usually upper-class maharajas and landlords, like – Maharaja Ramkrishna Ray (Natore’s royal family), Maharaj Krishna Chandra Ray (Krishnanagar’s royal family) and later followed by his sons. The second group consisted of the dewans, like – Brajkishor Ray and Nandkumar Ray (from Burdwan). The final group consisted of the professional musicians who composed and performed for their audiences. These were like any other musicians who became wealthy and popular due to the success of their music compositions. The Sakta poetry tradition beginning from Ramprasad had seen a steady transition from being overtly violent to a more humanist Vaishnav tradition¹⁵. However there was yet again a turn towards the goddess of destruction and violence during the mid 19th century with the rise of Nationalists’ iconography of the goddess.

The third Sakta poet in line was Mahendranath Bhattacharya (1843-1908), who lived in south Calcutta in a village called Andul. He dedicated his life to meditation and literary endeavours. Mahendranath Bhattacharya was one of the most prominent poets

¹³ Rachael McDermott, op.cit, p. 132.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ It is not to say that every poet turned towards the Vaishnavite features of poetry, there were many who constantly wrote on the Sakta deity as a part of their overall genre.

after Ramprasad and Kamalakanta. Some of the details of his religious life matched the examples set by his famed predecessors. Mahendranath too belonged from a middle class, high-caste Bengali family. But one of the most significant ways in which he shared with them and their followers a particularly Sakta ideology was his marriage of two set of values: those of the householder and those of the renouncer. All the three poets discussed above have had one thing in common that is being a Sadhak, i.e, they had their spiritual prowess proven to their followers. However, it is not to say that all Sakta poets were Sadhaks. There were many who composed in the genre without being spiritually/religiously¹⁶ motivated.

After the social reform movement in Bengal, the period from 1880s saw a dramatic turn towards romantic nationalism and patriotism. In addition, there is evidence that Shyama-sangit, in particular, was enjoying a popular renaissance among spiritually minded Sakta seekers. Ramkrishna Paramhansa contributed immensely to the rejuvenating of Sakta religiosity. Ramkrishna's saintly life and example gave the worship of Kali a tremendous boost and legitimization in the nineteenth century. The late-19th century revival of interest in traditional Hindu poetry and worship was accompanied and stimulated by new trends in the literary world, as well. Prose novels and histories were being turned to political purposes; Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay was one such personality who used literature as a political tool.

An absolute mismatch to this Sakta poetry tradition was Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894). He did not write about the goddess as a devotee or Sadhaka, rather used the image of the goddess to address the issues of our freedom struggle. Bankim was a Bengali nationalist poet, writer and journalist. He composed our national song Vande Mataram, personifying India as Mother Goddess. This song inspired many freedom fighters during our struggle for independence. Bankim invoked the use of iconographic tradition in the struggle for independence. This started a whole new tradition amongst the nationalist to see India as the Mother

¹⁶ Here I do not intend to put spirituality and religiosity on the same platform. I am aware of the fine line of difference between the two.

Goddess¹⁷. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay is however associated more with Hindu nationalism, as over time under pressure of the colonial state his writings instead of critiquing British rule turned towards liberation from 'Muslim' rule.

Girish Chandra Ghosh was perhaps the most famous example of this new breed of litterateurs; an actor, producer and dramatist who became a disciple of Ramkrishna, he staged many biographies of famous Indians that emphasized their nationalist fervor. Rooted in many of his acts were hymns to Kali and Uma. To name two others of the same persuasion, dramatists who wrote Sakta padas were Nabinchandra Sen (1846-1909) and Dwijendralal Ray (1863-1913). Among certain patriotic Bengalis, refashioned, politicized versions of Kali, Durga and Uma – usually called 'Ma' and signifying the land of India – became even more important in the early years of the 20th century. Starting in 1904-1905¹⁸, imagery derived from Durga's battle prowess and from Uma's poverty was also used by nationalist poets Mukunda Das, Dwijendralal Roy, Atulprasad Sen (1891-1923) and Rajanikanta Sen (1865-1910); in language reminiscent of *agamani*¹⁹ poems, they called Durga to awaken and return to aid them in their struggle for righteousness, they exhorted each other to come to the Mother's aid. As a whole, this nationalist poetry represented a trend away from the goddesses of Ramprasad-Kamalakanta's tradition steeped in spirituality and religion.

The question that now comes to mind is – whether Nazrul fits into these models set by his predecessors? If he does, then which model fits him better, the Sakta traditionalists or the nationalists? Does he comply with the rules and parameters of being a Sakta poet? The answer clearly is – No. Nazrul certainly does not belong to the group of Sakta traditionalists. Nazrul belonged to a poor family (his caste is not known to us, though he was a Sunni Muslim), a Muslim by birth, does not write about the marauders, neither does he influence those dacoits to switch to spirituality. When

¹⁷ India as Mother Land and Mother Goddess is a 20th Century phenomenon. Refer to Chapter-3, subsection on Nazrul's writings on the women.

¹⁸ This period refers to the first partition of Bengal and subsequent Swadeshi movement.

¹⁹ The term *agamani* comes from the word 'agaman' which in Sanskrit, Bengali and many other Indian languages mean to approach or to come. Since these songs heralds the coming of mother Durga they are known as *agamani*. These songs are also an ultimate triumph of devotion and *bhakti*.

there is a death in the family, Nazrul does not thank the Goddess for relieving him of the family responsibilities; rather it is widely accepted by his biographers that after the death of Nazrul's beloved son Bulbul, the poet took to spirituality to seek solace²⁰. He never showed any magical performances to his patrons or audiences. Nazrul never had any zamindar/landowner/raja-maharaja as his patron. The one and only thing in common between Nazrul and his predecessors was the style of writing about Kali and Krishna in one breath. The message was loud and clear from Nazrul that both Shyama²¹ and Shyam²² are the same; God is one.

Does he have anything in common with the nationalists? Yes – Nazrul, just like the nationalists, took to the imagery of goddess to address the malice created by the colonial power. Nazrul portrayed the country as Mother Goddess following the nationalist path. Along with these patterns of his writing, he also wrote of the Goddess as a devout believer. In the political imagery of the goddess, she was seen as a mother, as a protector of nature and the motherland as a saviour and above all, very interestingly in Nazrul's writing she was seen as the abridger of communal peace. Nazrul was perhaps unique in seeing the mother goddess a promoter of communal harmony.

Nazrul Islam thus turns out to be a different kind of *Sakta* composer who does not conform to the existing norms of the tradition. In what ways he was different is something that we shall discuss now in the following sections.

Hindu Religious Songs –

By Hindu religious songs of Kazi Nazrul Islam we mean those songs which were composed on Hindu religious themes. The maximum number of songs under this genre was his compositions on goddess Kali and the compositions on Radha-Krishna

²⁰ Most biographers of Nazrul count this as the sole reason for Nazrul to switch to spiritual writings. I, however, disagree to this as the only reason. There have been many other factors which we shall discuss a little later in the chapter.

²¹ Shyama is another name for goddess Kali.

²² Shyam is another name for god Krishna.

love lore. Apart from these, he composed songs on Durga, Saraswati, Lakshmi, Vishnu, Shiva, Ram and Sita.

Shyama Sangeet –

Nazrul Islam, one of the greatest poets of the Sakta padavali tradition, who also incorporated nationalist passions into his poetry, though slightly later, during the 1920s and 1930s. What differentiates his output from that of the poets discussed above is first that his nationalism is woven into songs whose main focus is the Goddess, instead of the Goddess being used for nationalism. Second, whereas none of the Swadeshi poets wrote more than a handful on Sakta themes, Nazrul composed well over one hundred. Significantly, many of these had nothing whatsoever to do with the political winds of his day.

Shyama sangeet or songs on goddess Shyama (popularly known as Kali) formed the most remarkable portion of Nazrul Islam's Hindu religious songs. Goddess Kali stands for force or power in its total sense which has been envisaged in her iconographical symbolism. She bears the image of a woman of dark complexion without anything to wear. Around her waist she wears only a garland of chopped off demon heads. Kali is regarded as one who symbolized universal motherhood²³ and it is in this aspect that she is very widely worshipped by the Hindus.

Nazrul used the imagery of Kali both as a reflection of India's current degradation and as a spur to political freedom. Towards the end of his literary career composed a considerable number of devotional hymns, many on Kali, which even today are extremely popular among musicians and singers. Some of them make explicit connection between the traditional cremation ground setting and the devastated land that is India. Sakta padas, therefore, functioned for Nazrul Islam as a means of reinforcing his political, anti-British sentiments.

Nazrul songs on Kali may be divided into two broad groups. The first group includes those songs which reveal traditional devotional sentiments. Here Kali is seen as the Universal mother-figure. The second group includes those songs which interpret the

²³ More so, the emphasis is on the power that conquers all passion and fear amongst her worshippers.

all pervasive power reflected in the Kali myth. In the first group of songs, Nazrul upheld the traditional theme of self-surrender to the goddess. By this we mean a situation where the worshipper surrenders himself totally before the goddess. Some of these songs reflect the affection of a mother-son relationship. But in the second group of songs Nazrul is far from being a part of traditional 'Sakta' Shyama sangeet. These songs interpret the power cult of the Kali and provoke a keen sense of awe. The iconographical terror of the demon killer symbolizing the universal force could agreeably inspire the rebel in Nazrul²⁴.

However, as we discussed above, Nazrul brought Shyam and Shyama together and this which seemed to be the most striking feature of his religious ideology, surely was not exclusive to him. Many poets, in fact most of the Sakta traditionalist found Shyama and Shyam inseparable. For e.g. in 'Shyama Mayer Kole Kande'²⁵, Nazrul says -

"Shyama Ma's lap a-climbing
 speak I always Shyam's name.
 Ma's become my *mantraguru*.
 My Thakur, though, is Radha-Shyam
 I dive into my Shyama-Yamuna,
 and play there in the water
 with my Shyam.
 But when He hurts me and neglects me,
 it's Ma who'll fill the dreams I have.
 On my heart, my instrument,
 Shyam and Shyama are two strings;
 playing at once inside myself,
 that splendid 'Om'
 forever sings."²⁶

Nazrul saw Ma Kali as Krishna. He brought two completely different traditions together. The amalgamation of the two traditions was not something that Nazrul did

²⁴ It can also be argued that this second category of song was more likely to be used as political symbolism, the victory of good over bad. Good = fellow countrymen; bad = English rulers.

²⁵ *Shyama Mayer Kole Kande*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 5, p.295. Translated by Rachael McDermott.

²⁶ Ibid

consciously²⁷. He did not distinguish between the Vaishnav and the Shakta tradition. In another song, Nazrul attached the goddess to the day to day life of an ordinary human-being. This was a common sentiment, following the traditional path. ‘Diner Hatey Din’ -

“Wherever are the lowly, the suffering, and the poor
There I’ve seen my Mother –
My food-filling Mother –
Though beggars’ clothes she wore.
When I bring all people
To your haven of delight,
Then I’ll see all darkness pierced
by your resplendent light”.²⁸

Nazrul on universal brotherhood, forgetting caste and class disparity, wrote ‘Ma ke Amar Dekheche ke’²⁹ :

“He who has seen my Mother
Can he hate his brother?
She loves everyone in the three worlds;
Her heart cries for all.
With her there’s no difference of caste,
No distinction between high and low;
All are the same.
If she sees a Chandala
like Rama with Guhak
she clasps him to her chest.
If you worship the Mother
hating her children
she won’t accept your puja’ the Ten-Armed One will not.
The day we forget the knowledge of difference
On that day only
Will Ma come home to us.”

Going over Nazrul’s songs on Hindu mythology, none could believe that these were composed by a Muslim poet. However, it is not to argue that Nazrul was the first to compose songs on these lines. There were a number of Muslim Vaishnav poets in Bengal. The way Nazrul submitted himself to the goddess Kali in his writings was

²⁷ It is not known why exactly Nazrul brought these two traditions together or what inspired him to do so. As a listener to his song, it only feels that he has been either trying to bring two traditions together, bridging the gap within a single community itself. Or at times it seems that Nazrul did it without any motive to it.

²⁸ *Diner Hatey Din*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.5, p. 287. Translated by Rachael McDermott.

²⁹ *Ma ke Amar Dekheche ke*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.3, p. 250.

remarkable. It almost raises doubts to call him a Muslim or not. There are till today many Muslim Baul singers in Nadia district of west Bengal.

Squarely in the nationalist trend, calling the demon-slaying goddess to save the country from the British colonial rule, Nazrul pours his heart out in these lines:

“Wake up, Shyama, Wake up Shyama!
Appear once more as demon-chopping Chandi!
If you don’t wake up, Ma,
Neither will your children.
Oh giver of food! Your sons and daughters starve, running here and there
More dead than alive. This sight doesn’t pain your heart?”

The cremation grounds you so love
Today is the land of India.
Come, dance on this cremation ground;
Breathe life into these skeletons.
For I desire, Ma, a free wind;
Energy I desire; I desire long life.
Shake off your sleep of delusion, Ma,
And wake up this Siva –
You’re surrounded by corpses!”³⁰

Much aware of his predecessor, Nazrul did not hesitate in praising Ramkrishna Paramhansa³¹ in his contribution towards Kali worship in Bengal. In his praise to Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa Nazrul wrote these few lines -

“O great Ramakrishna, take my Namaskar,
You have saved the dead country
By giving us the Mother of all-
i.e. Ma Kali.
She can save the country from
This deep, deadly trouble”.³²

³⁰ *Jago Shyama Jago Shyama*, NRS, Kolkata, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, 2005, Vol. 3, p. 278. Translated by Basudha Chakrabarty.

³¹ Ramkrishna Paramhansa (18 February 1836 – 16 August 1886), was one of the most famous and well-known *Bhaktas* of goddess Kali. Swami Vivekananda was a disciple of Ramkrishna.

³² *O Ramakrishna*, NRS, Kolkata, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, 2005, Vol.5, p. 271. Translated by Karunamaya Goswami.

One of the most famous songs of Nazrul must be mentioned here. This is one song that probably every generation of Bengali has heard on the occasion of Kali puja or otherwise. A few lines from – ‘*Bol re jaba bol*’

“Tell me hibiscus, tell –
What austerities did you do to get Shyama Ma’s feet?
Torn from your stems on illusion’s plants,
Falling scattered to the ground at Her feet,
You got liberation, bursting open,
beside yourselves with joy.
If only I could learn from your example
My life might bear fruit”³³.

Uma³⁴ Sangeet -

Nazrul Islam had also composed a number of songs on goddess Durga. Some songs were composed in the *agamani* tradition. But in some songs on Durga a keen patriotic feeling was reflected. The story of the demon that occupied heaven and evicted the gods and was ultimately killed by Durga had been symbolically presented in those songs. The heaven stood for India, and the gods stood for the Indians. The demon symbolized the British government. We have already discussed an example of this in the previous chapter, ‘Anandamoyeer Agamonee’.

Songs on Radha-Krishna Love-lore

Radha-Krishna love relationship is the most widely consumed theme in Bengali songs. It symbolized the Vaishnavite tradition of Bengali songs (also known as the *padavali*). Nazrul composed a large number of devotional songs on Radha-Krishna love-lore in various musical forms. Nazrul used the appropriate form of music to set these songs into tune. Karunamaya Goswami argues that Nazrul composed some songs in direct imitation of *padavali* tradition. Nazrul had set them to *kirtan* style singing. He also composed more than hundred songs on Radha-Krishna saga in Hindustani light classical forms. He particularly employed *thumri* musical style to these songs. It is quite interesting to see that while Nazrul composed his songs on Kali

³³ *Bol re Jaba Bol*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 5, p.263. Translated by Rachael McDermott.

³⁴ Uma is another name for goddess Durga.

mostly in Kheyal form, he employed thumri style in his songs on Radha-Krishna love lore. Some Radha-Krishna songs were composed on the Bhajan style as well³⁵.

No greater proof is needed of the fact that Nazrul was deeply integrated with the hearts of all communities living in the land, and of the intensely humanistic nature of his patriotism. Here are the first few lines of a bhajan by Nazrul 'O Mon Chalo Akul Pane'³⁶-

“O my mind, let us go to the region of joy,
That is the region of love where one goes in game of love
Of sorrow or grief there's none there.
There roams the eternal boy of Braja: he is Shyam who
Plays on the flute.
There's no death there, no fear: no creation,
No nemesis: there's only eternal youth,
who never has any fear”.

In another kirtan, Nazrul expressed his admiration for Shyam like this:-

“Where's the joy that could keep me at home? If my Shyam has
Become an ascetic, I too shall become one:
If his contemplation of me is now at
An end, if he is to forget me, let him!
I shall nevertheless always
Contemplate his beauty and
Remain an ascetic”.³⁷

The variety of themes he adopted in composing Hindu religious songs is simply astonishing. It shows what a thorough knowledge he possessed of Hindu mythological literature and what musical creative power he had to put these songs written by him to music.

Nazrul's religious writing calls for a much deeper understanding, clear of his involvement in politics or art. An instance of this could be his remarkable speech at the *Muslim Sahitya Samiti* in the year 1941. The speech, titled “Jodi Ar Banshi Na

³⁵ Karunamaya Goswami, *Aspects on Nazrul Songs*, Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, 1990.

³⁶ *O Mon Chalo Akul Pane*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.7, p.141.
Translated by Karunamaya Goswami.

³⁷ *Ei Khusi tey Ghore Thaki Ki Kore?*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.7, p. 168. Translated by Karunamaya Goswami.

Baje (What If the flute did not play any more)”, was to be the very last of his life. His words were a testimony to his individual religious beliefs. Right at the beginning of his speech Nazrul ornately articulated his “mystical” quest, his yearning to be united with the Absolute Void; the Supreme Being. Divinity in his speech was illustrated as both beautiful and affectionate. Nazrul’s speech also highlighted the poet’s penchant for syncretism. To make his point, he picked out two divine beings from the Hindu pantheon. He chose two opposing characters, Krishna, the kindhearted-affectionate god of *Vaishnavism*, and the goddess Durga/Kali or *Anandamoyee* who is an outstanding fighter of the evils. Krishna and *Anandamoyee* were juxtaposed repeatedly all through his speech.

Paradoxically, on occasion Nazrul counter-posed the loving rhythmic tunes of Krishna’s flute to the harsh reality of communal violence around him, i.e., used Vaishnavism for a political message. On the other hand, *Anandamoyee*, the fighter of demons, who was normally used to fight the political battle against foreign rule, Nazrul projected as a source for his own search. Nazrul spoke of her “Power of Love”, of her influence to transport him to a state of meditation, suggesting the disembodiment of his soul and its unification with her Being: “If the power of *Anandamoyee* in me does not dissolve me by carrying me into the supreme Void, then I will once again sing the songs of love, of equality...”.

Nazrul impressed on his audience by his refusal to serve Islam or Hinduism, or any other established religion. “...If I come, I will come only as a servant of the one and only indivisible God, who is above Hindus and Muslims, above all nations and creeds”. Along the lines of a long practice – to which Kabir, who composed virtuous and saint like hymns during the 14th century as well as Lalan Shah (popularly known as Lalan Fakir), one of 19th century’s prominent Baul musician belonged – Nazrul Islam tried to rise above the long running disconnect between the various religions in the country, by taking a non-sectarian position. They all believed in the almighty but not adhering to any particular community; god is one and communities should not be classified on the basis of their religious faith.

Much has been spoken and conjectured about Nazrul's religious views. In his time, Nazrul was mocked at by both orthodox Muslims and orthodox Hindus but the truth is

that for him *hamd*³⁸ and *naat*³⁹ in the Muslim tradition were as meaningful and spiritually uplifting as *kirtan*⁴⁰ and *shyama sangeet* in the Hindu tradition.

Islam and Nazrul –

Kazi Nazrul Islam, as we know, was a Muslim by birth and he wrote on a plethora of subjects and Hinduism too had a distinctive place in his writings. Islam did not find an exclusive attention of the poet though he wrote a lot about it and about the Islamic tradition. In this section we try to find out what Nazrul wrote about Islam and the Muslim community. As we have noted in the previous chapter, Nazrul had to face the wrath of the orthodox Muslims for having used Hindu imageries in his writings. Questions that I try to answer in this section are – what kind of messages did Nazrul try to send out through his Islamic writings? Did he criticize the existing orthodoxies within the religion? Did he attempt to break through the norms of existing Islamic writings or did he carry forward the same messages? Does he show his rebellious streak in his Islamic writings, if yes, then in what ways?

My attempt here is to briefly trace the genre of Islamic writings in Bengal in the late 19th and 20th century in order to place Nazrul's writings in this context. Bengalis of the present day Bangladesh and West Bengal cover one of the major Muslim ethnic populations in the world. They are outnumbered only by the Muslim populations of the Arab world and Indonesia⁴¹. Unlike the Indonesians and Persians, Bengali Muslims retained both their language and script despite Islamization and they are the world's largest body of Muslims to have done that⁴². The Bengalis from East and West Bengal remained aloof from the Islamization process of the Aligarh movement.

³⁸ A *Hamd* means praise. It is a poem or song in praise of Allah. It could be written in various languages.

³⁹ A *Naat* is a poetry that specifically praises the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Many of the famous scholars in the earlier days of Islam wrote Naat. People who recite Naat are known as Naat-Khua'an or Sana'a-Khua'an.

⁴⁰ *Kirtan* (Sanskrit: "to repeat") is a chanting performed in India's devotional tradition..

⁴¹ Amit Dey, *The Image of the Prophet in Bengali Muslim Piety (1850-1947)*, Reader's Choice, Kolkata, 2006, p. 1.

⁴² Ibid.

The Aligarh movement was led by Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan. This movement, however, failed to penetrate into the rural belts of Muslim population; it is here where the likes of folk singer/poet Lalan Shah come into play.

Content of the Islamic writings - A lot was written on the life of the Prophet Mohammad. An entire genre of Islamic literature is dedicated to the life and teachings and achievements of the Prophet. Also, there was a constant effort to change the world view on Islam, countering the attacks made by the Christian missionaries. It was often alleged that Islam was a religion of violence, a religion spread through the might of the sword. The modern *sirat*⁴³ writers, in contrast to the medieval ones, chose to put forward the message that Islam was a religion of peace, love and universal brotherhood. Apart from this there was also an effort to de-mythologize the figure of the prophet. A more humanized version of the Mohammad was preached through these Islamic literatures, making him the role model of the Muslim community. Why this shift? Prof. Amit Dey argues that this kind of shift was to prove that Islam was absolutely compatible with progress⁴⁴. The focus shifted towards the energetic, politically active and socially responsible prophet who could guide the Muslim community under the constraints of colonial environment. Apart from the prophet's life, the other genre of Islamic writings consisted of the *naat-i-rasul* or simply *naat*. The emphasis on the more humanized character continued in the naat tradition as well. The prophet was seen in many human avatars, such as boatman – who steers the fragile boat of life under adverse conditions, to the far away shore of peace⁴⁵; or a Caravan leader who safely guides his followers to eternal life⁴⁶.

Language of the Islamic writings and their Readers –

The vast variety of Islamic literature was meant to be read by the middle class and lower middle class Muslim population of Bengal. Under the Sufi tradition, it is also

⁴³ *Sirat* refers to – correct path of religion; to put all trust on Allah and wait for him to show the path.

⁴⁴ Amit Dey, op.cit. p.26

⁴⁵ Ibid, p 37.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

significant to note that a large number of Bengali Muslim population consisted of the newly converts from Hinduism. Poets like Sayyid Sultan used Hindi terms like *avatar* (for nabi) and *niranjana* (for allah) to make the Islamic tradition palatable to the converts who still continued to be under the indigenous Hindu tradition⁴⁷. Bengali poets often had to address the half educated or even illiterate Muslim masses of the Bengal countryside⁴⁸. What is the medium through which a message is spread is often the most important question – thus, it is important to note here that majority of the *naat* were sing-able. Yes, they could be sung. This makes it clear to us that Nazrul was surely not the first of his kinds to create a genre of Islamic songs. But, how Nazrul takes this tradition ahead is certainly worth a study. The *naat* could be sung or recited during wedding ceremonies. Prof. Amit Dey cites some examples where the *naat* were sung by prominent personalities. Poet Daad Ali's *naat* became very popular and they used to be recited in sweet musical tone during *milad*⁴⁹; Meer Mosharraf Hossain himself used to present his ghazals in praise of the Prophet⁵⁰.

The larger goal of these Islamic literatures were to encourage community solidarity, they played an important role during the period of Muslim revivalism. The Islamic literature, as discussed above, underwent a sea change during the revivalist movement. To quote from Prof. Amit Dey, “the *sirats* and *mauluds* tended to create a common platform in Bengali Muslim society where every Muslim felt comfortable to congregate. To promote unity and equality in Bengali Muslim society, non-*ashraf* writer Wajed Ali attacked the *ashraf-atraf* divide in his *sirat*. A similar spirit was reflected by the *baul* singer Dudu Shah. The *bauls* also belonged to the lower stratum of society. Thus *sirat* literature and folk songs became channels through which non-*ashraf* promoted community values over the current social division of Muslim society”⁵¹.

⁴⁷ Amit Dey, op.cit, p. 14. As discussed in the first chapter, the Muslims remained aloof from the British education system and relied much on the Madrasa teachings. Refer to Chapter-1.

⁴⁸ Amit Dey, op.cit, p. 34.

⁴⁹ *Milad-un-Nabi* refers to the birthday of Prophet Mohammad.

⁵⁰ Amit Dey, op.cit. p.39.

⁵¹ Ibid, p, 263.

Most biographers of Nazrul have seen him in isolation of this entire tradition of Islamic writings. As historians it becomes our prime objective to situate an individual as a part of the society, as an individual is a product of the society and cannot be studied in isolation. Nazrul's contribution to this genre formed just a fraction in the whole gamut of Islamic writings. Not to forget, there were non-Muslim writers as well contributing to Islamic writings, like – Brahma scholar Girish Chandra Sen and Sri Krishna Kumar Mitra. They published *Mohapurush Mohammader Jiban Charit* (1885) and *Mohammad Charit O Musalman Dharmar Sangkshipta Bibaran* (1886), respectively. Interestingly, even the most famous poem of Nazrul on Hindu-Muslim communal harmony, 'Kandari Hunshiyar' (Helmsman beware) had a precedence in Islamic writings. Maulana Rumi, Iqbal and Shah Abdul Latif, all had one thing in common – they addressed the Prophet as either the leader of the Caravan or the Helmsman. Shah Abdul Latif in Sur Sarirag (from Sind), Daulat Uzir Bahram Khan (16th century Bengali poet) called the Prophet 'Sujan Kandari' (Honest Helmsman) and even *baul* singer Lalan Shah called him 'Oparer Kandari' (the Helmsman of the World beyond).

On one count though Nazrul looked different from the contemporary Islamic writers. Nazrul believed in the power of the 'sword'. The sword was symbolic of strength. But the use of sword was not to violently spread the religion; it was to be used to free Islam from its inherent orthodoxies. 'Islam will never be rescued through these religious hypocrisies; the characteristic feature of Islam is the sword, neither beard, nor prayer, nor fasting'. According to Nazrul, the '*sword*' here signified revolution; a 'revolution' which was required to ward off the hypocrisy persistent within the religion. Nazrul categorically rejected the rituals and outward paraphernalia of Islamic religion as non-essential and emphasized the spirit of Islam which he understood to be that of readiness to fight for freedom. Nazrul believed that the very essence of Islam was its spirit of democracy, universal fraternity, and the principle of equal rights. He said, "The true life force of Islam: mass power, the principle of democracy, universal brotherhood, and the principle of equal rights"⁵². On another occasion he declared

⁵² Nazrul's letter to Principal Ibrahim Khan (1894-1978) (December 1927), reproduced in NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, 2005, Vol. 2, p.482.

that the greatest message of Islam was independence of mind- “Awakening of this independent-mindedness. This verily is the lesson of Islam....Say, O hero, my head is held high for ever. I want to see this independent mind is born. This is the greatest message of Islam- this is the essential import of Islam”⁵³.

Nazrul believed that medieval Islamic practices and religious conservatism were hurting the Muslim youth and keeping them backward. Nazrul assailed fanaticism in religion, denouncing it as evil and inherently irreligious. He devoted many of his writings to expound upon the principle of human equality, exploring the Qur'an and the life of Prophet Muhammad. For example, in ‘Sotya Mantra’, 1924, Nazrul says once again:-

“Christ, Buddha, Krishna, Mohammad and Rama: they
Recognized what man was and what was his price; so
They embraced in their hearts those whom men hated.
Now Gandhi sings that song again: you are enemies of man;
Eyes your, alas, have not opened to that wisdom.
Let the injunction of the Great Dispenser prevail”⁵⁴

A large section of devotional songs composed by Nazrul Islam is known as Islamic songs. Thematically these songs may be arranged under several heads. Some of the songs may be termed as *Hamd* or Hymn to Allah. Next are the *Naat* songs which expound the life and teachings of the Prophet. Of these, some songs refer to the Prophet’s advent and others to his demise. Some songs illustrate the ideals for which the Prophet lived and struggled. Azan or the call to prayer, Namaz or prayer, Ramzan or the month of holy fasting, Eid and Muharram are some of the subjects appearing in his Islamic songs; whose number is close to 200. Karunamaya Goswami claims Kazi Nazrul Islam was a pioneer in initiating the tradition of Islamic songs within Bengali music⁵⁵. Nazrul is singlehandedly given the credit of ‘revolutionizing’ the genre of Islamic songs. As mentioned above ‘*naat*’ were in sing-able form.

⁵³ *Swadhinchittor Jagaran*, NRS, Kolkata, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, 2005, Vol.4, p.566

⁵⁴ *Sotyo Mantra*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p.123. Translated by Basudha Chakraborty.

⁵⁵ Karunamaya Goswami, op.cit. p.145. Probably, Karunamaya Goswami was making the reference more towards the orthodox Sunnis, because Sufis were musical anyway.

They could be sung at any occasion. Nazrul's way of revolutionizing the genre of Islamic songs was not in the way he composed them, or not on the topics that he chose to compose on. Rather, what he did differently was the way these songs reached the masses. It was the change in medium which caused the revolution. From an oral tradition, the songs were now commercialized by His Master's Voice (HMV). They were sold in the form of records; making them widely available in the market. It is true that not every family could afford these records, but these could be played at a community gathering, festival or any private occasion. It is the 'medium' which revolutionized the genre of Islamic songs. By saying this I do not take away any credit away from either Nazrul or Abbasuddin Ahmed for composing and singing the songs. It is only to state that one has to delve deeper into the genre of Islamic songs before making any generalization on it. Nazrul and Abbasuddin Ahmed both have contributed immensely to this field, but we need to be more critical in question in the way the songs reached the masses.

He sang in not-very-melodious but a very moving voice. He set his songs to music, and then trained the singers. Nazrul Islam was largely responsible for changing Muslim middle-class attitude towards music⁵⁶. Music was unknown to the Muslim Bengali homes. It was considered to be more of a Hindu tradition to pursue arts like vocal music, dance, painting and the like. Abbasuddin Ahmad, a renowned singer, pleaded with the poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, 'Kazida' to him, that the Hindus had many of their songs in Bengali written for their festivals like Holi, Durga Puja, Swaraswati Puja etc. while the Muslims had none and Nazrul should remedy this⁵⁷.

Nazrul agreed and after overcoming the initial stiff refusal of HMV⁵⁸, this joint venture resulted in the next record with the songs on Eid "O mon, ramjaner oi rojar sheshey elo khushir Eid". This and other Islamic songs had an enormous impact on both Hindus and Muslims, due to their universality, novelty and unique renderings by

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 146.

⁵⁷ Rafiqul Islam, *Nojrul Jiboni*, op.cit, p. 202.

⁵⁸ Refer to the first chapter.

Nazrul and the singer Abbasuddin. Even those whose religious inclinations were towards a total non-acceptance of music in any form, found those Islamic songs to be extremely apt to their deepest spiritual yearnings. Thus, music entered the Muslim homes in a religious cultural garb⁵⁹. Moreover, Muslims could now find songs befitting each important religious occasion. Many more songs were recorded during this period. '*Allahte jar purna iman*', '*Jage na shey josh loye aar Mussalman*', '*Towfiq doa khoda Islame*', '*Bajichey damama bandhrey amama*' are the few titles of these innumerable songs. On almost every Islamic occasion such as Moharram, the birth of the Prophet, the Eid-ul-Fitr, Nazrul's songs began to be sung. The triumphant duo-Kazi Nazrul Islam and Abbasuddin Ahmed thus perceptibly changed the religio-cultural life of Bengali Muslims. There was a growing demand for Islamic songs outside the realm of the folk song tradition. So it was in the demand of this emerging and enlarging elite that devotional songs of modern sensibilities were to be composed. Nazrul had composed such songs which naturally were received with very high sense of enthusiasm.

Nazrul's Islamic songs are reverberations of the pristine glory and beauty of Islam which consists in dedication to human welfare and equality among men. If there is a touch of revivalism in them, this was derived only from the political regeneration of Islamic countries after the First World War. The first song in *Zulfiqur* (1931) begins thus:

“The red torch of the spirit of Islam is again aglow in
 All directions. You who are not aware of that fact, it's
 Up to you to awake and light up the lamp of your
 Life. Turkey has woken up with Ghazi Mustafa Kamal
 On the pinnacle of glory.
 The desolate land of Iran is awake today with Reza Shah Pahlavi
 The Egyptian has forgotten his slave hood and woken up,
 Mad with life, with Zaglul”⁶⁰

Referring to the Prophet as a Boatman, a couple of lines from ‘Kheya Parer Tarani’ (The Ferry Boat) –

⁵⁹ Nashid Kamal Waiz (granddaughter of Abbasuddin Ahmed), “Abbasuddin Ahmed: A pioneer's profile”, *The Daily Star*, October 27, 2001.

⁶⁰ *Zulfiqur*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.3, pp.295-330. Translated by Rashid Haider.

“Behold! Pilgrims come at night
To board the ferry boat,
What’s it that roars like thunder bolt?
Or is it the trumpet of universal doom?
And the storms and tempests deepen in the horizon”

“So, the passengers need not fear!
The Boatman and his companions
Are all expert hands,
The admiral-staff is ahead
The sail of salvation,
Sing loudly your song
With your heads down in humility,
And eyes full of a soft and serene expression
Of love and benignity.
Vain and futile are the threats
Of the sea-in-anger,
And howling tempests,
Behold the pilgrims of truth
Are safe on the other shore”⁶¹

On festivities, lines from Eid Mobarak –

“After the lapse of a year
You have come, Eid,
Having crossed many a desert of hundred miles,
Having caused many a tear to be shed
On many a sand-field.
You have brought from one of the seven heavens
A present to the door of the hungry,
The bliss of the flower-garden,
To the forest of thorns”

“Today from village to village,
Emperors and fakirs embrace
One another like brothers.
The two figures Lat-Manat hold on to the Kaaba and dance.
The trumpet of Islam resounds today,
Throughout the world,
There are no high and low – all men are equal,
Nobody is another king’s subject.
Who are you, Oh noble man, a Nawab or Badshah?
Says Islam, we are all for one another,
We are all brothers and shall share joy and sorrow equally,
None of us has the right to hold.
Is it ordained for some people to shed tears
And for others to light up chandeliers!
And just two people to have princely luck,
Millions to suffer from bad luck?”

⁶¹ *Khuya Parer Tarani*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 1, p.37. Translated by Abdu Hakim.

That is not the prescription of Islam”⁶²

Calling upon the ancient glory of Islam, Nazrul writes in ‘Taufiq dau Khuda Islam ke’ (Make Islam Strong, O God) –

“Make Islam strong, O God,
Let the Muslim world again prosper.
Give it back its sultanate of old,
Its ancient prowess and generous soul.
Once again bless Islam with heroic
Ali’s sharp edged Zulfiquar,
Give it back its old Caliphs and hasmat,
Its glorious Medina and Baghdad.

Give Islam again its Roomi and Saadi and Hafiz,
once more bless it with Khayyam and Tabriz,
Give it again its Akbar and its Shahjehan,
Bless it again with that dream in white marble, the Tajmahal!
Give it a sense of fellow-feeling and unity,
Its spirit of self-sacrifice and heroic mind,
Let the Muslims of the world form a single community,
Let its crescent-bedecked flag fly once again in the sky”⁶³.

The message of Muslim awakening could be read loud and clear from this poem of Nazrul’s, ‘Bhuvan-jayi Tora ki Haay’ (Are you the same Muslim) –

“Are you the same Muslims,
Who once conquered the whole world?
Are you the same people who once turned the Godless into true believers?
Those were the days when your Caliphs
Lived on dry bread and a few dates,
And ruled over half the world, with ease.

Your prophet, though the lord of a mighty empire,
Lived like a noble ascetic,
While today you lie in luxury’s quagmire.
Forgetting lion-cubs you now live with foxes,
Who can say if you’ll rise again,
And once more make the world quake
With your ringing footsteps”⁶⁴

⁶² *Eid Mobarak*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 6, p. 168/332. Translated by Bashudha Chakravarty.

⁶³ *Taufiq Dau Khuda Islam Ke*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 4, p.143. Translated by Kabir Chowdhury

⁶⁴ *Bhuvan-jayi Tora Ki Haay*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.5, p. 195. Translated by Kabir Chowdhury.

There are two more poems which I want to highlight, in these Nazrul has yet again referred to the 'boat' and the 'boatman' – 'Hey Mohammad, Behesat Hatey' (O Mohammad, Show me the Path) –

“O Mohammad! Show me the path from the heaven to find Allah,
Relieve me from the sorrows of this world.
Let your name be my boat, to take me to the next world...
O Mohammad show me the way
Where I will find the eternal life”⁶⁵

Another example of the similar theme – 'Jagater Nath, Karo Par' (O Lord, Help me Cross Over)

“Help me do the crossing, O lord of the Universe,
The boat is rocking on the waves of pity, endless is the crossing.
My boat is battered and there is no oarsman and the hope is remote to get to the shore”⁶⁶

An Indian citizen till 75 years of his life, a promoter of Hindu-Muslim unity, and one fine morning one finds that his Muslim identity has become more important than any other. When the cult of a national hero is forged, there are many stories built around him. His image was presented with a lot of camouflage, some facts and some myths! While researching on Nazrul, I found many such stories, many such myths. These myths helped creating the aura of the national poet, helped creating his exclusivity and uniqueness. These myths strengthened his identity of a 'rebel'. One such myth that this chapter tries to nuance was that Nazrul revolutionized the genre of Islamic songs. Nazrul did not invent the genre of Islami Gaan, the naat were already in singable forms. What Nazrul did differently was that he gave a different context to these songs and he commercialized the music, helped it reach every household. He recorded the songs and HMV sold them in market.

The Poet on Hindu-Muslim Relationship -

The nineteenth century Humanism and twentieth century Rationalism made way into Nazrul's ideology. Nazrul was deeply influenced by the likes of Tagore, Muzaffar Ahmed, C.R.Das and Fazlul Haq. The ideologues helped the poet see a world beyond the boundaries of caste, religion or sex. Nazrul's soul-stirring poem "Kandari

⁶⁵ *Hey Mohammad! Behesat Hatey*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.6, p.280. Translated by Labiba Hassan.

⁶⁶ Translated by Abu Rushid in - *Islamic Writings of Kazi Nazrul Islam*, Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, 2012, p. 109

Hunshiar” reads – “Hindu na ora Muslim, oi jijnashe kon jon? Kandari balo dubichhe manush santan mor maar”⁶⁷; are lines which cannot be simply translated. Penned in 1926, this poem vividly describes a country in mayhem like a ship facing turbulent waves on a tumultuous sea. In a situation like this it never mattered if the person drowning offered a namaaz or folded his hands in a temple. What mattered was that he was a human being. The poet further wrote – “*Asahay jaati dubichhe moriya, janena santaran, Kandari aaji dekhibo tomar matrimuktipan*”⁶⁸. In these lines the poet urges the sailor to take the ship across the turbulent waters. The underlying message was however to the Indian citizen, requesting him to save the country (ship) before it was torn apart by the communal (sea) frenzy.

Nazrul’s thoughts on communal harmony were not mere words. He practiced what he preached and his marriage to a Hindu girl was a testimony to his ideology. Given his strong stance against communal violence one can only imagine what his reaction would be on India’s partition. Nazrul lived for thirty odd years, post partition, but only physically and not mentally. “To those who complain why I’m not like them: Does the nightingale’s songs belong to anyone? Can you call wild flowers your own? Just because I was born into a certain community or society doesn’t mean it owns me. I belong to the world and all its corners. I’m a devotee of eternal radiance and because I can rise above petty communalism, I’m a poet.”⁶⁹

Throughout his life Nazrul was an enthusiastic advocate of Hindu-Muslim unity and cooperation. Juxtaposed against the background of long-standing Hindu-Muslims feuds since at least the partition of Bengal (1905), this role of Nazrul is definite departure from communal Muslim thinking⁷⁰. With the collapse of the ephemeral Khilafat – Non-cooperation movement by mid-1922, Hindu-Muslim friction reasserted itself in many districts of Bengal. For a time it was prevented from assuming too large a proportion by the sincere efforts of Chitta Ranjan Das who

⁶⁷ *Kandhari Hunshiyar*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol. 2, p. 176.

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Kazi Nazrul Islam, speaking at a reception in Albert Hall, Calcutta December 15, 1929. Translated.

⁷⁰ Refer to Introduction and the previous chapter on the widening gap between the Hindus and Muslims and the communal tensions in Bengal.

engineered the Hindu-Muslim Pact⁷¹ (December 1923). As stated earlier, Nazrul worked closely with Das in his mission of Hindu-Muslim unity and his efforts to find an alternative to the Gandhian path. In less than two years, however, Das was dead (16 June 1925) and the Pact crumbled completely in about a year. Hindu-Muslim feuds reached the city of Kolkata and communal riots broke out there in April 1926 shattering all the hopes of the visionary poet⁷².

Communal violence was on a rise in the mid 1920s. Not just Calcutta, even the rural areas adjoining Calcutta were burning in this episode. Nazrul in his “Mandir O Masjid” fervently addressed the issue of communal hatred and partially blamed the religious leaders for a situation like this. In his essay “*Mandir O Masjid*” (mid-1926, after the riots, ‘Temples and Mosques’), published in the magazine *Gana Bani*,

“Once again the murky Hindu-Muslim issue has raised its head. First, there are brawls, and then they hit each others’ head. Yet once those who have got drunk over the ‘prestige’ of Allah or *Ma Kali* get bashed, then, as I can see, they do not cry for Allah or *Ma Kali*. No, Hindus and Muslims together cry and lament in the same language: ‘*Baba Go, Ma Go*’ – just as children who have been abandoned by their mother, cry for their mother in one choir. Hearing the weeping of the wounded, the mosque does not waver, nor does the Goddess-in-stone of the temple respond”

Nazrul spoke about the communal violence and tried to warn the political leaders against the threats of the same. One such platform was the annual session of the INC, held in Krishnanagar in 1926. Here, Nazrul sang one of the most famous songs he ever composed, *Kandari Hushiar*.

Nazrul’s concern for Hindu-Muslim conflict went beyond mere political expediency. He sought a broad-based, permanent solution to the vicious problem and approached it from the socio-cultural and historical perspective. Therefore his concept of Hindu-Muslim unity transcended the temporary context of common struggle for freedom from colonial bondage. Rejecting the outward paraphernalia (symbolized in ‘tiki’ or

⁷¹ Hindu-Muslim Pact has been discussed at length in the previous chapter.

⁷² Note poet’s own inconvenience in riot-torn Kolkata in April 1926 in his letter to friend Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay (1901-76), NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.3, pp.518.

the holy tuft for Hindus and in ‘dari’ or the beard for Muslims)⁷³ of religion, Nazrul emphasized universals in them both and also the complementary elements to unite the Hindus and Muslims as humans and Indians/Bengalis. That apart, he also understood Bengali culture and literature as a common heritage for both Hindus and Muslims of the province⁷⁴.

An exchange of letters between Mr. Ibrahim Khan, a reputed educationist and writer, and Kazi Nazrul Islam throws light on the efforts of orthodox Muslim fraternity to take control of Nazrul to themselves, and Nazrul’s reaction to the same (this aspect shall be dealt in the next sub-section). Nazrul was pledged to Hindu-Muslim unity and assured to work through his art to that end and for the liberation and uplift of his countrymen. From the path he thus set for himself he never deviated. In his efforts at finding a synthesis, Nazrul produced a literary edifice quite unprecedented in Indian literature – one that was equally inspired by both Hindu and Islamic traditions and created a prospect of harmony between the two. We have earlier noted how Nazrul drew symbols, images, and references from both Hindu and Muslim classical sources to create a new texture that dazzled his audience at the time and remained unique and controversial for all time to come. More concretely, Nazrul’s own life exemplified his vision of Hindu-Muslim unity to be built on the solid ground of love and intermarriage. In this programme, humanity was to remain the only consideration to the exclusion of superficialities of religion.

Reaction of the Muslim Orthodoxy against Nazrul Islam’s Writings:-

‘Sandwich every bit of criticism between two layers of praise’

- Mary Kay Ash⁷⁵

This is exactly what Nazrul did to the criticism he faced. His followers showered him with praises and guarded him from unrelenting criticism. Nazrul’s critique and his

⁷³ Note the fierce sarcasm that Nazrul has thrown on Tiki and dadi in poems like *Pather Disha* and *Pyakt* and in prose columns *Mondir o Masjid*, and *Hindu-Musalman*.

⁷⁴ Letter to Principal Ibrahim Khan, op.cit

⁷⁵ Mary Kay Ash (May 12, 1918 – November 22, 2001) was an American businesswoman. Mary authored three books - her autobiography, *Mary Kay; Miracles Happen and You Can Have It All*.

defense spoke a lot about his enormous popularity. It was more of a fight between the fundamentalists and the liberals to claim Nazrul as their torchbearer.

The charges against Nazrul Islam varied. These were primarily on the grounds of his use of ideas from Hindu sources into the literature of the Bengali Muslims and efforts at bringing Hindu-Muslim unity. *Islam Darshon*, an Islamic monthly, began its first crusade against Nazrul Islam in the first issue of September-October 1922. An attempt in this issue was made, primarily by M. Abdul Hakim (d.1957), to direct the writing styles of the Bengali Muslim writers. According to him, the language and the subject matter of such writers must be specifically Islamic. Even creative literature was to be based on Islamic faith and practice.⁷⁶

The strongest critique of Nazrul came from Mohammad Reyazuddin Ahmad (1862-1933), who wrote the article ‘Lokta Musalman na Shaytan?’⁷⁷ (Is the Man a Muslim or Devil Himself?). In this essay Ahmad particularly commented on Nazrul’s open support to Mustafa Kamal’s success in Turkey. Nazrul in his work ‘Kamal’ had attributed the success in Turkey to the outright rejection of the orthodox beliefs persistent within Islam; to Kamal’s corresponding preference of the sword to beard, prayer and fasting⁷⁸. In a response to Nazrul, Ahmad believed that these rejections of Islamic beliefs were a sign of ‘an uncivilized, untaught, unpolished, rude person who is devoid of religious knowledge of an atheist?’ Ahmad determined that the reason for such a behavior on Nazrul’s part was the fact that his head was filled with too much of Hinduism. Ahmad concluded his article by saying, ‘if there were pure Islamic regime (in India), this person would have been killed or his head would have been cut off’.

The next issue of *Islam Darshon* (Nov 1922) carried a concluding waft on Nazrul. Introducing a poem Prolayer Bheri⁷⁹ by Maulavi Mohammad Golam Hossain (1873-

⁷⁶ M. Abdul Hakim, *Bango Sahityer Bartoman Abostha ebong Jatiyo Sahityer Adorsho*, *Islam Darshon*, Vol.3, No.1, Sept 1922, pp. 1-12.

⁷⁷ *Islam Darshon*, Vol.3, No.2, October 1922, pp. 81-3.

⁷⁸ *Kama Pashal*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p.469

⁷⁹ Prolayer Bheri, *Islam Darshon*, Vol.3, No.3, November 1922, pp. 119-21.

1964), editor M. Abdul Hakim informed that he received a large number of protests against Nazrul Islam's writings, as well as write-ups applauding him for his campaign against the 'rebel' poet⁸⁰. Golam Hossain in his poem desired that Nazrul be exiled to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and confined in the Cellular jail. However, not relying fully on the British, Hossain then consoled himself simply that God would punish Nazrul in hell. He concluded the poem with a fervent prayer to God to destroy Dhumketu and Nazrul⁸¹.

Broad structural confines for Bengali Muslim literary writings were already put forward in the very first issue of *Islam Darshon*. These were primarily directed against Nazrul, in order to put restrictions on him. In a review titled 'Dhumketu', Sayeful Islam wrote disparagingly the message of Nazrul's poem by the same name⁸². He accused 'Dhumketu' of instigating rebellion against religion and morality and of causing harm to society and the country. He also found sentiments 'loud and emotional like that of an atheist', and 'harshness in language' in the poem Dhumketu by Nazrul⁸³.

Editor Mohammad Abdul Hakim proceeded to crush the rebellion of the poet with a long poem entitled 'Bidroho Damon' (Suppression of Rebellion). Once again, the poem accused Nazrul of sacrilege, ignorance, recklessness etc. However, even Abdul Hakim in an attempt to warn Nazrul, ended up by using Hindu religious symbols as well thereby proving the cultural mix in popular cultural streams. Hakim compared Nazrul with Bibhisan of the Ramayana and Dusshasan of Mahabharata. He also

⁸⁰ In the introduction to Prolayer Bheri editor Abdul Hakim also mentioned that his lead in protesting against the irreligiosity and godlessness of Dhumketu and its founder Nazrul had been followed by a number of other Muslim-edited journals such as the *Moslem Hitoisi*, *Mohammadi*, and *Moslem Jagot*. In our present research, however, we have not been able to consult the files of these magazines and therefore cannot determine the nature and extent of those protests or accuracy of editor Hakim's claims. Though, Mustafa Nurul Islam has, in his book – *Samokale Nojrul Islam 1920-1950*, reproduced a collection of original material from these contemporary periodicals.

⁸¹ Prolayer Bheri, *Islam Darshon*, Vol.3, No.3, November 1922, pp. 119-21. Mustafa Nurul Islam states that the attacks on Nazrul stopped during his jail term (Nov 1922-Dec 1923). There were renewed attacks on Nazrul soon after he published his collection *Chittonama* and *Indropatan* in 1925. As stated above, Nurul Islam has reproduced the excerpts from the contemporary periodicals.

⁸² Appeared in the first issue of *Dhumketu*, 11 August 1922.

⁸³ Syeful Islam, "Dhumketu", *Islam Darshon*, Vol.3, No.1, Sept 1922, pp.16-20.

referred to Yama (God of death) and Shani (Saturn)⁸⁴. Towards the end of the poem Hakim warned Nazrul that attempts to break convention and customs would be punished with fine and imprisonment⁸⁵. In a separate section of the same issue of *Islam Darshon*, Hakim also wrote a review of Nazrul's magazine *Dhumketu*. This too charged Nazrul of - infidelity, rebelliousness and of using Hindu imageries. He further pointed out that Nazrul was following the path of some older Hindu periodicals like *Sandhya* (1906-07), and *Bijoli* (a contemporary periodical)⁸⁶.

Mustafa Nurul Islam in his *Samokale Nojrul*⁸⁷ informs us that Nazrul's remarkable popularity among Hindus and simultaneous attack on him by fundamentalist Muslims led some modernized, western-educated Muslims to construct a different approach to the 'rebellious' poet. He says, "By 1926, it was felt necessary by a group of progressive Muslim writers to include Nazrul within the Muslim literature programme. This realization came only after Nazrul's reputation as a first-class poet was firmly rooted among the Hindus and Muslims equally. Acting according to the situation, the Muslim progressive group started writing in appreciation, and even in defense, of Nazrul literature"⁸⁸. For example, the commentary 'Sahityo Samalochanay Kayekti Katha'⁸⁹ (A Few Words on Literary Criticism) by a writer pseudonymed Pothik (Wayfarer) wrote that, Nazrul had indeed turned rebellious but the Muslim fraternity could get him back through gentle and generous review of the positives and negatives of his work and then inviting him to the right path⁹⁰.

A similar hope was expressed by writer Abdul Majid in the *Saogat* in July 1926. In an article called 'Banglar Musalmaner Bhasa O Sahitya' (Language and Literature of

⁸⁴ M. Abdul Hakim, "Bidroho Damon", *Islam Darshon*, Vol.3, No.1, September 1922, pp. 40-45.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ M. Abdul Hakim, "Bibidho Prosango" *ibid*, p.47.

⁸⁷ Mustafa Nurul Islam, *Somokale Nojrul Islam: 1920-50*, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka, 1983.

⁸⁸ This was a running argument in Mustafa Nurul Islam's - *Samokale Nojrul Islam 1920-1950*.

⁸⁹ Pothik, "Sahityo Samalochonay Kayekti Katha", *Islam Darshon*, April 1926, partly reproduced in Mustafa Nurul Islam, *Samokale Nojrul*, pp.67-8.

⁹⁰ Pothik, "Sahityo Samalochonay Kayekti Katha", *Islam Darshon*, April 1926, partly reproduced in Mustafa Nurul Islam, *Samokale Nojrul*, pp.67-9.

Bengal's Muslims) Majid praised Nazrul Islam for his ability to give expression to Islamic ideas in a language he described as 'Islami Bangla Bhasa'. Elaborating on the language Majid said that, Nazrul spoke in the language of common Bengali Muslim population. It was easier for the people to connect with him and his expression of emotions. Lamenting Nazrul's Hinduistic aberrations, Majid dreamt for the happy day when the 'rebel' poet would be released from the world of the unreal and come back home 'in the dress of a pure Musalman, with the mind of a pure Musalman'⁹¹.

While appreciating his popularity there was an attempt to manipulate the line of Nazrul's literary growth in favour of the 'planned' or 'controlled' Muslim literature. An example to this was a letter by Principal Ibrahim Khan (1894-1978). The letter began with 'Brother Nazrul Islam'. Later in the letter Principal Khan repented the fact that the poet was not being accepted and respected by the Bengali Muslims, while the non-Muslims had already paid their homage. However, Nazrul should not abandon his own community because: 'your abode is Muslim literature – Bengali Muslims are looking forward to the central message of Islam will resound through your voice....nobody is there to claim the throne of the kingdom of Muslim literature in Bengal – you should take it. You deserve it.'⁹² Nazrul's response to this attempt by the campaigner of Muslim 'cultural nationalism' or a separate examine Muslim communal identity was, not surprisingly, negative. In his reply to Ibrahim Khan's letter Nazrul categorically refused to occupy the 'throne of Muslim literary kingdom of Bengal' denying the divisibility of literature into parochial entities like an exclusive 'Muslim Literature' separate from Bengali literature as such⁹³.

Though, in the 1930s, Nazrul developed a whole new genre of songs called Islamic Gan (Islamic Songs, which we have already discussed) that accelerated the pace of Muslim awakening, he remained persistently non-communal. Nazrul also translated Hafiz and Omar Khyyam, and even rendered a part of the Koran into Bengali verses.

⁹¹ Abdul Majid, "Banglar Musalmaner Bhasa O Sahitya", reproduced in Mustafa Nurul Islam, *Samokale Nojrul*, pp.70-1.

⁹² Ibrahim Khan's letter has been fully reproduced in Mustafa Nurul Islam's *Samokale Nojrul*, op.cit.

⁹³ Letter to Ibrahim Khan, reproduced in Mustafa Nurul Islam's *Samokale Nojrul*, op.cit.

Moving further ahead would be incomplete without taking a note of Nazrul's relationship with the Muslim cultural renaissance. Following India's first resistance and subsequent revolt to the Colonial rule – the revolt of 1857 – British rulers constantly condemned the Muslims. As a result, the Muslims in the country had an extremely tough time trying to avail basic rights like education and jobs in the colonial government, aggravating their sense of being left out and frustration. To reinforce confidence amongst the Muslim minority population of British India, a wave of “Muslim renaissance” grew, centred around the depths of Muslim intellectual past and European renaissance, which was much before the rise of Nazrul.

Nazrul grew to be an ardent supporter of this great movement for a “Muslim rebirth”. Nazrul repeatedly addressed Bengal's Muslim literary society, the “*Bangiya Muslim Sahitya Samaj*”. He penned/gave words to various poems on the premises of the rich past of the Muslim world, or in styles derived from Persian and other Middle Eastern traditions, as exemplified by his *ghazals*. Yet his body of works was anything but rigid and traditional. Nazrul cautioned against unquestioned faith on religious scriptures, which included the Islamic sacred book the “Quran”, and expressed cynicism towards all self proclaimed messengers/servants of god, which included the “*mullahs*” as well. Nazrul, in his poem “*Manush*⁹⁴ (‘Human Being’)”, admonished the “*mullahs*” and priests who put devotion to the religious texts above humanity and harmony.

Nazrul strongly opposed radicalism based on religion and oppression of women. This attack aggravated the extremist Muslims sects, who condemned him and even called him a “*kaffir* (heretic)”. All through Nazrul's active life, he was intensely criticized by extremist Muslims for his incorporation of Hindu philosophical values with the Islamic way of life in his body of works and for openly disapproving many of the Islamic teachings. Even though being a Muslim by birth, he gave his sons syncretic names, combining Hindu tradition with Islamic: Krishna Mohammad, Arindam Khaled (Bulbul), Kazi Sabhyasachi and Kazi Aniruddha.

⁹⁴ *Manush*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.2, p. 74

Nazrul revolted against the idea that the Quran, or any other holy scriptures, could be put above the lives and rights of humans. He openly condemned those who were ready to kill humans in the name of any scriptures, recalling the fact that all Holy Scriptures were brought into existence by human beings themselves. Another important essay was on *Bangla Sahitye Musalman* (Muslims in Bengali Literature). In it he set forth his views on what literature should be like. “If we desire to leave our mark in literature, the first thing we must do is to flow spontaneously and rapidly. Writings that are dull and stagnant and are bereft of vitality will do us no good and will never endure. Very few writers in Bengali show a boundless desire for freedom”⁹⁵. Thus, Nazrul did not propagate the message of an exclusively Muslim identity. Rather he dreamt of a community based on secular principles that worked together for the development of an overall growth of an individual in an atmosphere of freedom from dogma.

⁹⁵ *Bangla Sahitye Musalman*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2005, Vol.1, p. 427

Chapter - 5

From the 'People's Poet' to the 'National Poet'

'Popularity is not the yardstick of judging poetry. That which reflects the psyche of the age is not just poetry, it is great poetry'¹

- *Rabindranath
Tagore*

Once known as the 'janagoner-kobi' (people's-poet), Nazrul was now² hailed as the 'jatiya-kobi' (national-poet). This transition was not an easy one. How do we define a 'people's poet'? Surely a tricky question! My endeavour here is to bring forward the occasions where Nazrul participated, his preference for places spoke volumes about the kind of audience he tried to reach. The language and the subject he chose and the places he went set a clear pattern defining him as a people's poet. The other side of being a people's poet is how the poet is received by his readers/audience. As a testimony to this there are some instances where Nazrul has been felicitated, which yet again manifests the popularity he enjoyed amongst the people. In this sub-section I have tried to jot down examples which defined and justified the epithet of 'people's poet' to Nazrul's name.

Nazrul – The People's Poet

Poetry, for Nazrul, was a mode of social action and communication. One may call Nazrul Islam a people's poet because he came from the lines of the common people and spoke about the common man's concern, issues that concerned them. The other reason for which people respected him so much was that he wrote about these issues using their own familiar native tongue, making much use of *do-basha* colloquialisms and dialect. Nazrul showed the mirror of what the ordinary man felt. In addition, he composed songs, not just poetry, it being even more of a popular medium. Finally, I think that the fact that he was born poor perhaps also aided in the creating an image of his being more connected to ordinary people.

¹ Reproduced in Pabitra Gangapadhyay, *Kobi Shikriti*, Bangla Academy Patrika, Dhaka, Winter-1970.

² In the contemporary world Nazrul is known as the National Poet of Bangladesh.

While Rabindranath Tagore toured the foreign lands, Nazrul toured the countryside – especially East Bengal. Apart from a lucid language what connects a public figure to the public is his personality. If this figure speaks your language, you instantly connect to him. And if this public figure is that one person who chooses to visit your village - your school or college, then he becomes all the more close to you! Such was the cause of Nazrul Islam’s popularity and his instant connect with the audience.

What made our poet so accessible – was it because of his down-to-earth attitude³, his ‘writing on demand⁴’ way of functioning or his use of ‘common people’s language’? Or was this due to his humble social origins? Was it solely a function of class? According to me, all of these factors contributed in the making of the ‘people’s poet’. Why would people flock to hear the poet; probably because his language was lucid enough even for a farmer to understand. One distinguishing feature of Kazi Nazrul Islam’s poems and songs was his remarkable facility for using words of Sanskritic or Arabic-Persian origin wherever appropriate. Under the influence of the Wahabi movement, a self-conscious effort to make Urduised Bengali the literary language of Bengali Muslims started with the foundation of the Muhammadan Literary Society in 1863 under the patronage of Nawab Abdul Latif⁵. Nazrul, on the other hand, fell under the category of the group which strove to strike a balance between the two traditions. In fact, his distinctive use of language contributed to his public image. Nazrul Islam brought back into Bengali poetry, powerful words of Arabic and Persian origin which the Muslims used in common conversation⁶.

Nazrul Islam’s speech and expression was distinctive and different from the run of mill, but that did not mean that he was an outright rebel. In some ways he was more rugged than his contemporaries but there were also streaks of softness and sentimentalism in him. Nazrul widely used the *Do-Bhashi* language, a language

³ Refer to Chapter – 2.

⁴ Refer to Chapter – 2.

⁵ He argued before the Hunter Commission (1882) that Urdu was the natural language of upper class Bengalis, whereas the Muslim poor could be taught a Bengali which should shed some of its Sanskritic vocabulary and enrich itself with more words of Arabic-Persian origin.

⁶ Buddhadeva Bhattacharya, *Nazrul: Nana Prasanga*, p. 243.

spoken by the common Muslims. Throughout his life Nazrul remained a spokesman for the Hindu-Muslim socio-cultural synthesis. It would, however, be completely wrong to say that Nazrul was the sole bearer of this syncretism. Much before Nazrul, the Bengali Muslim literary tradition showed the way to a syncretic language.

Nazrul's popularity had trebled after his prison stay. Nazrul was arrested in Comilla (East Bengal) on 23rd of November 1922 and was released on the 15th of December, 1923 from Beharampur (West Bengal). Nazrul stayed a year and three weeks in prison. Nazrul was first kept in Alipur jail, then shifted to Hooghly jail and finally transferred to Beharampur jail. Nazrul earned country-wide respect by being imprisoned. The wreath of the nationwide respect was presented in the form of Rabindranath dedicating his musical, *Basanta* (Spring), to Nazrul. What moved Nazrul's followers more was his decision to go on a thirty nine days long hunger strike. Nazrul's popularity had shot up so high that there was no end to receptions and felicitations accorded to Nazrul after his release from jail. Even the demand for his banned books grew steadily.

To begin with, Nazrul's first went to Medinipur Literary Conference. The eleventh anniversary of the Medinipur branch of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad was celebrated on 22nd February 1924⁷. In the afternoon session of the second day, Nazrul was felicitated. At this reception, Deshpran Birendranath Shasmal⁸ delivered a speech on Nazrul. On the evening of the third day, the poet was accorded a huge reception at the Bangla School grounds. On behalf of various institutions of the town, Nazrul was presented with a plaque in felicitation. On the fourth day the poet was accorded at yet another reception, this time by the Muslim community, at the prayer grounds. The poet was hailed at this programme and the *ulema* prayed for him⁹. Other than the various meetings and programmes, Nazrul was to attend invitations from many schools and respond to many personal invites as well. Touched by their overwhelming

⁷ Azharruddin Khan, *Bangla Sahitye Nazrul*, D.M.Library, Kolkata, 1959.

⁸ Birendranath Sasmal (26th October 1881 - 24 November 1934) was a lawyer and political leader. He was known as *Deshpran* because of his work for the country and for his efforts in the Swadeshi movement.

⁹ Rafiqul Islam, *Nazrul Jiboni*, op.cit, p. 217.

love and warmth, Nazrul dedicated his poem *Bhangar Gaan* to the people of Medinipur¹⁰. In the last week of February 1924, Nazrul visited Kurigram of Greater Rangour district. He went there to address the annual *milad mehfil* of Kurigram High School and stayed there for two days.

In the first week of May 1925, Gandhi and Chittaranjan Das both joined the Congress conference in Faridpur. In light of the differences between Mahatma Gandhi and Chittaranjan Das, the Faridpur session was quite significant. Nazrul came to Faridpur to join the provincial conference. Poet Jasim Uddin, in his memoir, *Jader Dekhechi* (Those Whom I have met), writes about Nazrul's visit –

“The poet did not say anything extraordinary at the conference, but when he sang, it had an electrifying effect. Every time he stopped singing, the crowd shouted for more...it is hard to describe the wonder that descended upon the crowd when the poet sang ‘*Jater name bojjati, shob jat jaliat khelche jua*’ or ‘*Shikol pora chhol*’. The other day when Nazrul sang ‘*ghor ghor ghorre amar shadher charkha ghor*’, Gandhi laughed merrily at the song”¹¹

In the same year, during Gandhi's visit to Hooghly, the poet was yet again invited to the conference. Here, Nazrul sang another song on Gandhi, namely *Bangla ey Mahatma*¹². Pranatosh Chattopadhyay in his book *Kazi Nazrul* writes –

“Gandhi had heard the poet sing a couple of times, but he didn't understand Bengali too well then. Nazrul's friend, poet Subodh Rai, sitting next to Gandhi, gathered that he wasn't understanding the words. So Subodh Rai carefully translated *Bangla ey Mahatma* into English and gave it to him while travelling to Shantiniketan ashram with Gandhi”¹³

In July 1925, Nazrul went to Bankura at the invitation of Bankura Youth and Student Community and the Gangajal Ghati National School. It was decided that the poet would first inaugurate the Gangajal School and then join youth and students' conference in Bankura town. When Nazrul alighted from the train at Bankura station, he was greeted by throngs of young people. Brown sahib, the popular principal of Bankura College, accompanied by his wife, was also at the station to welcome him.

¹⁰ Rafiqul Islam, *ibid*, p. 218.

¹¹ Jasim Uddin, *Jader Dekhechi*, Presidency Library, Dhaka, 1951.

¹² *Bangla ey Mahatma*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, Vol.3, p. 15

¹³ Rafiqul Islam, *Nojrul Jiboni*, pp. 235-236

This couple was quite fluent in Bangla. Pranatosh Chattopadhyay describes the overwhelming reception accorded to Nazrul at the station in following words –

“It was about eight in the morning when the train reached Bankura. Young people stood smartly in a line, like soldiers, each one carrying a stick. Standing straight and calm in front of them were Brown and his wife. The moment the poet stepped off the train, Brown sahib stepped forward and shook hands with the poet. Behind him the young man raised his flag and called out, ‘Bande Mataram’! the young men behind him raised their sticks to their shoulders, took two steps forward and greeted the poet in unison, ‘Bande Mataram’! I saw a copy of the banned *Bisher Banshi* in Brown sahib’s hand. And Mrs. Brown carried a copy of *Bhangar Gaan*”¹⁴

After his release from jail, Nazrul gradually became more and more involved in active politics. He stirred the crowd with his speeches at public meetings in Comilla, Medinipur, Hooghly, Faridpur and Bankura. But it was only towards the end of 1925 that he got completely engrossed in active politics. He no longer restricted his work to the educated class and spread his activities among farmers, fishermen and workers. Nazrul was supposed to attend a peasant-worker conference at Mymensingh on the 17th and 18th of January 1926, but he was unable to do so due to his illness. However, he wrote a letter for the conference and it was read there.

“A massive peasant-worker conference was held on the 17th and 18th of January in Mymensingh town. Mani babu sang a few songs of Kazi Nazrul Islam, while Hemanta babu read Kazi sahib’s letter and poems. Kazi Sahib said –

It is you who are the life of the country, the hope of the country, the future of the country. You are the true sons of the soil.... It is with your love that this land is watered; with your blood that the cropland is so fertile, it is you my brothers that have the right to this land.... And my worker brothers, the massive buildings you build for the lords are red with your blood; with the very marrow of your bones you are making silver coins, your tears stream into the sea, yielding pearls. Yet these are the ones who are neglected today, repressed and hungry. They receive no education; they go without food, no clothes on their backs....”¹⁵

Next in the row was the ‘Nikhil Bangiya Proja Sammelan’ (All Bengal Tenants Conference) held on 6th – 7th February, 1926 in Krishnanagar. Nazrul was one of the main organizers of this conference. Muzaffar Ahmed writes – “Along with me, Abdul Halim, Kutubuddin Ahmed, Shamsuddin Hussain and Soumendranath Tagore attended this conference. I met Nazrul after three years at Krishnnagar station, when

¹⁴ Rafiqul Islam, *Ibid*, pp. 239-240.

¹⁵ *Langol*, Sixth issue, 7th February 1926, p. 5.

he came to receive us”¹⁶. Next month, 11th and 12th March, Nazrul attended the All Bengal Provincial Fishermen’s Conference held in Madaripur. The inaugural song of the conference was Nazrul’s ‘Jeleder Gaan’ (Fishermen’s Song). The thirteenth issue of *Langol* wrote about the Fishermen’s Conference held in Madaripur –

“In his speech, the chairperson of the reception committee Sri Pratapchandra Guha said...I am honoured to welcome the devotee of the fiery man of Bengal, the rising sun of youth, the proponent of ‘Agni-beena’, brother Sriman Nazrul Islam”¹⁷

The poet’s syncretic ideals assured that people from both the communities could be his ardent followers. Nazrul not only believed in drawing from both Hindu and Islam religious imageries, he also used a syncretic language. Nazrul, through the realm of literature and music tried to keep this tradition alive. During the Bengal Provincial Congress Conference in May 1926 held in Krishnanagar Nazrul sang his two most popular songs on communal harmony. This conference was presided over by Jatindramohan Sengupta. Sarojini Naidu also attended this conference. It was at this conference of Congress that Deshbandhu Chittaranjan’s Hindu-Muslim Pact was abolished. The pact had proposed certain political facilities for the Muslims, but in light of the Hindu-Muslim riots, this pact was rendered null and void. Nazrul wrote his famous song ‘Durgamgiri Kantar Moru’ (Rugged Mountains, Difficult Deserts) for this conference. Muzaffar Ahmad claims -

“Crowd had gathered at the puja building in Rajbari, but there was tension all around. It was not clear whether the conference would actually take place or not. Everyone imagined themselves to be a leader. No one paid heed to anyone else. It was in such a situation that Nazrul’s inaugural song began. He had written the song keeping in mind the situation of the night before the conference.... ‘durgamgiri kantar moru’.... This song of the poet poignantly depicted the state of Bengal’s politics after the death of Deshbandhu. The people listened in awe. After the song, Jatindramohan was about to speak, but was obstructed again and again. The late Jogeshchandra Chowdhury also tried to speak in vain. Even Maulana Ahmed Ali, editor of the recently closed-down ‘Nabojug’ could not bring the rabble-rousers under control. Somehow or the other, the conference broke up.... About 1500 copies of Nazrul’s banned books *Bisher Banshi* and *Bhangar Gaan* were sold at the conference”¹⁸

¹⁶ Muzaffar Ahmed, *Nazrul Islam: Smritikatha*, National Book Agency, Kolkata, 1965, p. 194-95.

¹⁷ *Langol*, Thirteenth issue, 11th – 13th March, 1926, p. 5

¹⁸ Muzaffar Ahmad, *op.cit*, p.196.

As part of the Provincial conference, the Students and youth conference was also being held at Krishnanagar at the time. The Conference was chaired by Birendranath Sasmal. Nazrul had written 'Kandari Hunshiyar' for the Provincial Conference. And for the students and youth conference he had written 'Chhatra Daler Gaan' (Song of Students' Group) – 'Amra shakti, amra bol, amra chhatra dal' (we are power, we are strength, we are the students' group). The Peasants' Conference was also held during the same time in the Town Hall. The Conference was chaired by Dr. Nareshchandra Sengupta. The Conference was inaugurated with Nazrul singing his songs 'Krishaker Gaan' (Song of the Peasants) – 'Uthre chashi, jagaddashi, dhar koshe langol' (Arise peasant, O tiller of soil, hold your plough firmly); and 'Sramiker Gaan' (Song of the Workers) – 'Ore dhongsho pother jatri dol! Dhor haturi, tol kandhe shabol' (O! travelers on the path of destruction, grab your hammers, lift your shovels)¹⁹.

In the years to follow, Nazrul kept himself extremely busy with more and more meetings, felicitations, seminars and other informal gatherings. Winter 1927 Nazrul attended the first annual conference of Dhaka Muslim Sahitya Samaj (Dhaka Muslim Literary Society). As discussed in the previous chapter on religion, Nazrul made a gradual transition to the world of music. During the 1930s, the poet chose to aloof himself from active politics and devoted much time to music. His music was an instant crowd puller. Recording Islamic songs along with Abbasuddin Ahmed turned out to be a strong medium to get connected with the common people. His fan-base grew even further. Nazrul had become a household name.

The chapter on socio-political ideology of Nazrul Islam we discussed Nazrul's participation in the election of 1926. To garner popular vote from the majority of Muslim population Nazrul urged Pir Badsha Miah to issue a fatwa in his favour. This is one such rare instance where Nazrul used his 'Muslim' identity for political purposes, though the Fatwa reproduced below shows that it was not focused on Muslim identity but on Nazrul's sacrifice, anti-imperialism and brilliance as a poet. A fatwa from a *Pir* surely connects with the lower rungs of the masses. Unfortunately though, Nazrul lost the election. An excerpt from the *fatwa* is given below. The

¹⁹ Rafiqul Islam, *Nojrul Jiboni*, op.cit, p. 258.

*fatwa*²⁰ which Pir Badsha Miah gave in support of Nazrul appeared in *Saugat*, under the title ‘Badsha Pirer Paigam’ (Badshah Pir’s Message) –

“The greatest pir of Bengal, the emperor of ulema Maulana Abu Khaled Rashiduddin Ahmed Kebla Sahib’s message – to the Muslim voters of Dhaka division, Indian administrative council.... Nazrul Islam is a fearless young man of integrity, loved by all. He had sacrificed everything for the country, for the nation, even spending a long period in prison. Many of his books have been confiscated by the government. He had upheld the honour of Bengali Muslims in the world of literature. His works are discussed and admired not only in India, but across the countries in the world. It is only his works that have proved that Bengali Muslims can carve their niche for themselves through their writings in the world literature. I hope....the Muslims will also show the world that Bengali Muslims know how to value the knowledge and talent of their national poet.

If not, the people of the world will laugh in scorn, saying that Bengali Muslims do not know how to value knowledge and talent. So I hope you do not do anything to invoke the scorn of others. He can do much for the country and for Islam.... I request my followers that they ensure Kazi sahib’s victory”²¹

Nazrul’s supporters and admirers far outnumbered his critics. There were large numbers of meetings organized to condemn the critiques of Nazrul. Felicitation ceremonies were also organized to show support to the liberal minded poet. More felicitations meant more gatherings, more popularity for the poet. One such function was organized in Chittagong. Muslim students of Chittagong held a huge meeting at the Chittagong Mosque premises. Large number of school, college and Madrassa students attended the function. The meeting discussed the attitude of the orthodox section of the society towards Nazrul and the following proposals were made²² -

- This meeting declares that Kazi Nazrul Islam is a jewel of the Bengali Muslim society. We condemn the few fanatic *ulemas* with vested interests.
- This meeting expresses its disgust and condemnation towards those who run the paper that stooped so low and published vulgar abuse concerning the venerable Kazi Nazrul Islam. If this paper continues to do so in future, then this meeting calls upon all young Muslims of Bengal to boycott it.

²⁰ Fatwa - A legal opinion or decree handed down by an Islamic religious leader.

²¹ Reproduced in Rafiqul Islam, *Nojrul Jiboni*, op.cit, p. 276

²² Ibid. p. 342. Unfortunately, the date of this above mentioned meeting is not clear to us. However, both Hindu and the Muslim communities were happy that a reception was accorded to Nazrul. In this regard, a letter from Ashutosh Narayan Chowdhury was printed in 14th December, 1928 issue of *Saugat*. So we could assume that this reception took place somewhere close to first week of November 1928.

Another function was organized at Kattali village, 11th January 1929, near Chittagong city, in honour of Kazi Nazrul Islam. There was a massive gathering of both Hindus and Muslims²³. In order to felicitate Nazrul with a national reception, a meeting was summoned on 9th October 1929 at the Muslim Institute Hall, Wellesley Square by the following people to form a reception committee: AK Fazlul Haq, Jaladhar Sen (editor of *Bharatbarsho*), Hedayat Hossain (Principal, Calcutta Madrassa), S. Wajed Ali (Presidency Magistrate), HS Suhrawardy, Dinesh Ranjan Das (editor, *Kallol*), Muzaffar Ahmed and Premendra Mitra. At the meeting presided over by Khan Bahadur Asaduzzaman, a proposal was adopted to accord Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam a national reception on behalf of the people of Bengal in recognition of his extraordinary poetic talent. On the 15th December 1929, Poet Nazrul Islam was given a reception at Calcutta Albert Hall. Large number of people joined the reception. These included politicians, poets, writers, philosophers, scientists and social workers. The reception was chaired by the famous Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray. The moment the poet entered the hall, the poet was greeted with loud slogans. The famous singer Umapada Bhattacharyya inaugurated the reception with Nazrul's song *Chal, Chal, Chal*. In his speech as the chair of the meeting, renowned scientist Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray said –

“We have gathered here today to express our respect to the poet of Bengal. Bengal is spellbound by the magical talent of Rabindranath. That is why the talent of others goes unnoticed.... Nazrul's talent did not simply grow under the influence of Rabindranath and that is why Rabindranath recognizes him as a poet. Today I am filled with joy to see that Nazrul is not only the poet of Muslims; he is the poet of Bengal, the poet of Bengalis. Today Nazrul too is being honoured by all, regardless of caste or creed. Poets are normally soft and meek, but not Nazrul. Imprisoned and in shackles, he has written with his blood, arousing fresh zeal in the heart of Bengalis”²⁴

Amongst the prominent political leaders, Subhas Chandra Bose came to felicitate the poet. Present at the ceremony Subhas Chandra Bose made a moving speech praising Nazrul. He said:

“In a free country there is a clear link between life and literature. That is absent in our country. As the country is an occupied one, the people cannot gather much from the events

²³ Rafiqul Islam, op.cit, p. 347.

²⁴ Reproduced in Rafiqul Islam, *Nojrul Jiboni*, op.cit, p. 353.

that occur. Nazrul is an exception. Many of us go to jail, but we see very little influence of prison life in literature. This is due to lack of sensitivity. But Nazrul went to jail and we find evidence of that in much of his work.

It is true that Nazrul is a rebel poet. It is clear that he is a rebel within. When we go to war, we will sing Nazrul's war songs! When we go to prison, we will sing his songs.

I travel to various provinces of India; I have had the opportunity to hear the national anthem in various provincial languages, but I think I have never been moved by such a soul-stirring song as Nazrul's *Durgama giri kantara moru*. Nazrul's dreams are not simply his own, these are the dreams of the entire Bengali nation²⁵

The 'rebel' poet came further close to the masses, though now unknowingly, during the Bangladesh liberation war. *Swadhin Betar Bangla* (Free Bengal Radio) song transmission²⁶ was yet another source which got Nazrul closer to the masses, in such a way that he probably had never imagined. During the liberation war, patriotic songs were transmitted from Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. Nazrul's songs were amongst the few chosen ones to be transmitted through the radio. These songs were intended to infuse the listeners with patriotic feeling and energize them to fight the enemies. These and some more patriotic songs during the tumultuous days of the struggle for freedom have become essential parts in the history of liberation music of Bangladesh.

The list of songs composed during the Bangladesh liberation included some songs of Tagore – “ ‘Desh e desh e bhromi re’, ‘Oi pohailo timir o rati’; Nazrul's ‘Karar oi louhokopat’, ‘Shikol pore chhol’; Sikandar Abu Jafor's ‘Jonotar shongram cholbei’; Moshad Ali's ‘Shonen shonen bhaishob’, ‘Pak poshuder marte hobe’ ”; D.L. Roy's “Dhonodhanno pushpe bhora” and many more. There were many programmes named after the Nazrul's books and poems like – Agnibina. Liberation songs, protest songs that the Bengali listeners were unaware of became part of their survival mechanism through Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. The songs were a medium of bringing the nation together, together in their fight against injustice and tyranny. There were the songs of unity, of protest sung during the period of repression. These songs were sung by the soldiers, the common people, every woman, and every child of East Pakistan.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶ Swadhin Betar Bangla or Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra (Free Bengal Radio Station) was one of the vital organs of the Bangladesh Liberation War. The radio station was one of the only medium of reaching out to large number of people in one go. It broadcasted the Declaration of Independence. The war propaganda was carried out through this radio transmission.

Two such very influential ‘jagoroner gaan’ (Songs of Awakening) during Bangladesh Liberation War composed by Nazrul were -

- “*Karar Oi Louho Kopat* - written and composed by **Kazi Nazrul Islam**, this song is also known as 'Bhangar Gaan' (Song of Destruction). It was also incredibly inspirational during the British occupation and the independence movement of India. The Rebel Poet is believed to have written this song while he himself was in prison”.
- “*Chol Chol Chol, Urdhogogone Baajey Madol* - written and composed by **Kazi Nazrul Islam**, the song is hailed as one of the best marching songs ever. The song instantly brings momentum to the listener and infuses one with unmatched energy”.

Before we understand what made Nazrul the national-poet from being the people’s poet, it would be important to know how Bangladesh as a nation came into existence. In my understanding, it is the process of identity creation of a new nation that gradually paved the way for Nazrul’s rise from people’s-poet to the national-poet.

The Rise of Bangladesh –

It is accepted that the freedom struggle of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) originated from the Bengali language movement. In hindsight it could be said that the essential motivation of autonomy and independence of the Bengali speaking people of Pakistan came largely from linguistic nationalism. A brochure was published in Dacca, the capital of East Pakistan, on the 15th of September, 1947 entitled ‘Pakistaner Rashtra Bhasha, Bangla na Urdu?’ (Pakistan’s national language Bengali or Urdu?). In that booklet it was proposed that²⁷:

- Bengali language shall be the medium of instruction in East Pakistan
- Bengali language shall be the medium of court communication
- Bengali language shall be the medium of office communication

²⁷ Tamaddun Mazlis, *Pakistaner Rashtra Bhasha – Bangla na Urdu*, Dhaka, 1947. Reproduced in Rafiqul Islam, *The Bengali Language Movement and Emergence of Bangladesh*, Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, 2001

Ignoring the attempts made by the Bengali population of East Bengal, the central government of Pakistan ceased to appreciate the the feelings of the majority community. No attempts were made to assign the fair place of Bengali language in state affairs. As a result, the ‘Rashtra Bhasa Sangram Parishad’ (The State Language Committee of Action) was formed by various students and cultural organizations of Dacca in October, 1947. The committee fervently protested the exclusion of the Bengali language from the newly-issued paper currency, postal stamps, coins, and office forms of the Government of Pakistan. However, all said and done, another year passed by without any success for the East Pakistanis to attain equal status on the language front. Amidst the ensuing protest, the central Pakistani government took an initiative to open twenty adult education centres all over East Pakistan to teach elementary Bengali through Arabic script. The motive behind such an initiative was to “create a newfangled Bengali different from that of West Bengal. Needless to add, the report was jettisoned by the linguistic scholars and Bengali intelligentsia”²⁸.

The last nail in the coffin was the speech delivered by the prime minister of Pakistan, Khawaja Nazimuddin, on 26th January 1952 at the Dacca session of ruling Muslim League Party; declaring that “Urdu will be the state language of Pakistan”²⁹. This announcement took the language movement to an altogether new level and led to the formation of a new organisation. The State Language Committee of Action was formed on 21st February 1952, and the same day was declared as the State Language Day³⁰. The Muslim League government at the centre prohibited all sorts of processions, meetings, demonstrations and gatherings. However, none of these actions could stop the students of Dacca University from protesting against the oppressive laws. They held massive demonstrations all around the university. The students came to blows with the government. The police and para-military forces resorted to wide spread tear gas shelling, baton charges, and finally shooting³¹. As a result, hundreds were injured, several were killed and thousands were arrested. However, none of these

²⁸ Rafiqul Islam, *The Bengali Language Movement and Emergence of Bangladesh*, Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, 2001, p. 131.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ 21st February is now recognised worldwide as the International Mother Language Day.

³¹ Rafiqul Islam, *The Bengali language*, op.cit, p. 131.

repressive actions taken by the government could deter the language movement. The killed activists were declared martyrs.

21st February, 1952, popularly called '*Ekushey*' (the twenty first) changed the course of history and became a day of celebration for the Bengalis in East Pakistan. The day became the mark of an inspiration for all the subsequent struggles. 21 became a symbol of resistance, revolt and struggle for national unification. Liberation was inevitable when the foremost opposing political parties of East Pakistan took a step together and created a united alliance with a 21 point program to topple the existing Muslim League Party in the upcoming general election which was to be held in March, 1954³². The United Front registered an overwhelming victory and formed the government in East Pakistan. With the new government's initiative, Bangla Academy was set up in East Pakistan on 12th June, 1957. This academy aimed at 'promoting the culture and development of the Bengali language and literature in East Pakistan'

The 'happy days' for East Pakistan were soon over. The military coup of 1958 in West Pakistan led to the dissolution of the 1956 constitution, in other words, it led to a big blow to the constitutional guarantees that were allotted to the Bengali language. The military general, General Ayub Khan rose to power in West Pakistan. Apart from other regressive rules, the General proposed an all new Roman script for all Pakistani languages³³. The commission submitted its report in August, 1959 suggesting that two separate boards for Urdu and Bangla should be set up. The main concern of this commission was, however, to bring Urdu and Bengali nearer and to create a 'common language' – an idea cherished by the Pakistani political heads for a long time³⁴. Numerous boards and committees were setup for the above mentioned purpose, though nothing materialised for the Bengali speakers.

³² Ibid

³³ Pakistan National Educational Commission Report, 1959-1968, p. 293. Also reproduced in, *50th Ekushey: International Mother Language Day*, Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, 2001, p. 140

³⁴ Ibid

In March 1969, General Yahya Khan came to power after Ayub Khan failed in his political gimmicks of - "controlled politics", "populism" and "outright authoritarianism". The period of his Ayub's reign had heightened the communal tension in East Pakistan. The assertion for self-government, democracy on the one side and the suppression by the armed-forces government on the other, only augmented the rift between the West and East Pakistan. In a frantic effort to reclaim lost position the ruling government under Ayub Khan, in 1968, convicted Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of joining hands with India. The conspiracy against Mujib and his imprisonment further infuriated the Bengali sentiments. This conspiracy was known as the Agartala Conspiracy Case.

After the arrest of Mujibur Rahman, the Awami League (Mujibur Rahman's political party in East Pakistan) gave in a 6 point charter demanding regional autonomy and representing the Bengali in services. Giving in to the rising pressure, the first general election was held in after over two decades, in 1970. The Awami League won by a huge majority, securing one hundred sixty out of one hundred sixty two seats in East Pakistan and two hundred ninety out of three hundred in West Pakistan assembly³⁵. The Awami League failed to form its government even after winning the election, as the ruling army regime avoided the formation of an elected government citing one excuse over the other. A civil disobedience movement was initiated by Mujibur Rahman from March 8, 1971 to secure their constitutional rights³⁶.

"The students and even the government servants joined the movement. On March 9, the judges refused to swear lieutenant general Tikka Khan as the governor of East Pakistan province. It provided the army an opportunity to resort to military reinforcement to tackle the unrest. A brutal militancy campaign was launched wherein men, women and children were indiscriminately slaughtered. The genocide provoked East Pakistan to declare a war of liberation from the West Pakistani regime. On March 28, the Liberation Army chief Ziauddin Khan announced the formation of a new nation - Bangladesh. The Indian army sided with the Liberation Army against Pakistan. The defeat of Pakistan was followed by declaration of a

³⁵ Sajal Nag, *Two Nations and a Dead Body: Mortuarial Rites and Post-Colonial Modes of Nation-Making in South Asia*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 41, No. 50 (Dec. 16-22, 2006; pp. 5183-5190) p. 5185.

³⁶ M Mamoon and Jayanta Kumar Ray, *Civil Society in Bangladesh: Resilience and Retreat*, Firma KLM, Kolkata, 1996, pp 38-81

sovereign, independent state of Bangladesh, which was provided official recognition by other nations. A new nation was thus born on March 25, 1971³⁷

While a new nation was born, its 'new' identity was yet to be created. Language remained the foremost binding factor for the Bengali Muslim population of East Pakistan. Hence, choosing a literary figure that would represent the entire nation needed their utmost attention. Both Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam were equally popular amongst the Bengalis of East Pakistan. In fact, Tagore had a larger fan following than that of Nazrul's. During Ayub Khan's dictatorship a stringent cultural policy was fabricated to keep Tagore's secular influences away from Pakistan³⁸. Ayub Khan's government feared that Tagore could be the binding force between Bengalis of East Pakistan and West Bengal of India.

A constant threat for the ruling party in West Pakistan was Rabindranath Tagore and his rising popularity amongst the population of East Pakistan. Tagore's birth-anniversary commemoration was a huge celebratory occasion in East Pakistan, which caused grave concern for the government in West Pakistan. Tagore was a threat to West Pakistan as they perceived his stature as a binding force between the two Bengals, which is, East and West Bengal (India). Ayub Khan's regime cautiously rolled out a cultural guideline to keep up the divide between the two Bengals intact. Some of the major markers of the guidelines were - "(i) Islamisation of Bengali language; (ii) promoting the use of Arabic alphabets instead of Devnagari; (iii) institute language committee to reform the Bengali language; and (iv) banning Tagore and the promotion of Nazrul Islam as poet of the Muslim nation³⁹". Tagore was declared "anti-Islam" and a "Hindu poet" and was banned in Pakistan. The state further went on to form a Nazrul Academy. The purpose of the academy was to represent Nazrul as a "Muslim nationalist" and thereby to "promote the culture and integrity of Pakistan on the basis of Islamic traditions and heritage".

³⁷ Ibid. Translated by Sajal Nag in *Two Nations and a Dead Body*.

³⁸ Sajal Nag, *Two Nations and a Dead Body: Mortuarial Rites and Post-Colonial Modes of Nation-Making in South Asia*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 41, No. 50 (Dec. 16-22, 2006; pp. 5183-5190) p. 5185

³⁹ Hassan Uzzaman, *Secularism and Bangladesh: In Search of History of Consensus*, Pallav Publication, Dhaka, 1992, p 101.

The people of East Pakistan were extremely critical of the any state sponsored function on Nazrul. The government went ahead in creating Nazrul as their hero and celebrated his birth anniversary in 1970. It was a state sponsored affair where the agenda was to showcase Nazrul as the poet of the Muslim masses and Tagore of the Hindus. The Nazrul Academy funded by the state however continued its efforts to portray Nazrul as the face of the "Muslim renaissance" and "Pakistani nationalism". The academy's purpose was however to set up an Islamic society in East Pakistan, but the Bengali intelligentsia pre-empted the conspiracy.

In a move to combat the conspiracy of the state the liberal sections of the Bengali society highlighted the image of Nazrul as the "people's poet" who was equally iconic in Hindus and Muslims alike. They re-established Nazrul's ideology and asserted that his revolt and struggle was against all kinds of despotism, subjugation and intolerance. They regretted the use of Nazrul as a political tool. The same Nazrul who dedicated his life to fight against all kinds of oppression was now being used to promote the ideas he always opposed. The counter-move to the state's conspiracy unfolded into a massive cultural movement and culminated into a political struggle. Following the Indo- Pakistan War of 1965, Rabindranath Tagore and his body of work was officially banned by the state. However, this ban did little to suppress the public recitals of the Tagore's work⁴⁰.

The Making of the National Poet –

Unfortunately, the turn of the events leading to Nazrul being declared the 'National Poet' took place only, once he had turned mute, when he had no opinion about anything around him, when he was absolutely dependent on the doctors and nurses, when his better-half was paralyzed and bedridden. On 9 July 1942, Nazrul was at the Calcutta Radio Station, had a story-telling programme for children. He began broadcasting the story on air and then suddenly stopped. He could not continue. The director of the programme, Nazrul's friend Nripendrkrishna Chattopadhyay, took Nazrul home. The rest of the events, i.e. his health problems, treatment have been well

⁴⁰ Rafiqul Islam, *The Bengali Language Movement and Emergence of Bangladesh*, Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, 2001, p. 135

discussed in the second chapter. What we shall discuss in this chapter is – how Nazrul, an Indian citizen by birth, was declared the National poet of Bangladesh; how he was made the representative of the Muslims; how Nazrul added to the identity creation process of the newly independent nation – Bangladesh.

After partition, the East Pakistan Literary Council appealed to the government to provide Nazrul Islam a thousand rupee grant. With the efforts of Habibullah Bahar, a prominent minister in East Pakistan, the government on 1st April 1948 granted Nazrul a monthly allowance of one hundred and fifty rupees⁴¹. However, as Nazrul lived in Kolkata, his family did not receive the grant for two years due to bureaucratic tangles⁴². Finally Nazrul was provided the money through the Comilla Banking Corporation and later through the Pakistan Deputy High Commission in Kolkata⁴³. As the popular saying goes, ‘out of sight is out of mind’. For over a decade Nazrul lived a secluded life, completely away from glitz and glamour of the artistic world. The poet whose verses inspired freedom fighters, attracted the colonial state's fury and fought injustice was virtually unattended and untreated from 1942 to 1953. After he fell sick, Nazrul lived a very unstable life in Kolkata for the next ten years. Other than the Jagattarini Gold medal in 1945 and some government and private assistance, no proper arrangements were made for Nazrul's treatment. Whatever little Nazrul had earned in these years, especially the later years when he got associated with HMV, were all spent on his wife's treatment.

The newly independent state of Bangladesh with its newly found cultural freedom renewed its interest in the literary icon of the two Bengals – Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam. On one hand where Rabindranath Tagore's ‘Amar Sonar Bangla’ was declared the national anthem, Nazrul's ‘Chal Chal Chal’ was declared the marching song. These two literary figures were the only bridge between the two Bengals now. With Tagore's death in 1942, it was only Kazi Nazrul Islam whom Bangladesh could felicitate and claim their own. To make the most of the opportunity

⁴¹ Rafiqul Islam, *Nojrul Jiboni*, op.cit, p. 466

⁴² Muzaffar Ahmed, op.cit, p. 253

⁴³ Ibid

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared to celebrate the poet's birthday in Bangladesh and at the same time accord national honour to the poet. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had declared Bangladesh to be a secular state, the state's constitution were based on nationalism, democracy and socialism⁴⁴. Thus, by felicitating Nazrul, the state did not have any religious sentiments attached to it. Nazrul easily could be celebrated as the symbol of the ideas of the new nation, nationalism, democracy and socialism.

In view of that Sheikh Mujib presented his wish to Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, to be permitted to bring Nazrul to Dhaka, (Bangladesh) where his birth anniversary could be formally celebrated⁴⁵. Since the poet's medical condition rendered him in no state to respond, invitations were sent out to Nazrul's family members and an official letter of request was sent by the state. The request was followed by a reassurance that the poet would be sent back to India before his next birth anniversary. Following the permission and the acceptance of the invitation the poet was taken to Bangladesh on May 24, 1972 where he was the state's guest.

On the 24th of May 1972 the poet was brought to Dhaka along with his family by Bangladesh Biman, Bangladesh's national airlines⁴⁶. The plane touch down at Tejgaon Airport in Dhaka at 11.40 in the morning and crowds thronged the streets to greet the poet⁴⁷. Arrival of Nazrul had given his fans massive reasons to rejoice and celebrate. He was then taken by ambulance to the Kabibhaban on Road no.28, Dhanmandi⁴⁸. President Abu Sayeed Chowdhury and Prime Minister Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman went to Kabibhaban to welcome the poet in Dhaka. Paying his respects to the poet at Kabibhaban in Dhanmandi, President Abu Sayeed Chowdhury said –

⁴⁴ Ayesha Jalal, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia: A Comparative and Historical Perspective*, CUP, Cambridge, 1996, p 51

⁴⁵ Mohammad Nurul Huda, *Bidrohi Kobi O Bangabandhu*, Nazrul Institute, Dhaka, 2009

⁴⁶ Rafiqul Islam, *Nojrul Jiboni*, p. 469

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ The house has now been turned into a museum and partly being used by Nazrul Institute to carry forward the legacy of the poet.

“I have come to pay respects to the great poet on behalf of seventy-five million Bengalis and the government of Bangladesh. Poet’s arrival in Bangladesh is a historic moment. It will be cherished in our memories forever.... We got endless inspiration from Nazrul during the independence struggle. His song Durgam Giri will forever inspire people in their struggle”⁴⁹

The expenses of the poet were taken care of by the Bangladeshi government. Along with medical facilities, Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibar Rehman announced a monthly one thousand taka allowance for the poet. He personally instructed an officer to ensure that the amount was delivered to the poet every month. The poet was kept in state honour in Dhaka. The national flag was hoisted every day at Nazrul’s residence. The poet’s 73rd birthday was celebrated in Dhaka on 25th May 1972. His birthday was celebrated with great pomp. Large number of people came by to greet the poet. Birthday was over, celebrations were done, it was time to return the poet to his country. Surprisingly neither the Indian state asked for him nor was the Bangladeshi government inclined to return him to his native country despite its initial assurances. The poet continued to stay at his state provided luxurious Dhanmandi house⁵⁰. The poet kept well under the constant medical supervision.

In recognition of his contributions to Bengali literature and culture, the poet was accorded an honorary D.Lit. degree on 9th December 1974 by Dhaka University at a special reception. Vice Chancellor Dr. Abdul Matin Chowdhury read out the following message on behalf of Dhaka University on the occasion –

“You were an uncompromising poet of truth. You were the target of British ire, they imprisoned you, but you remained fearless, burning bright and happy on the side of truth. You are the poet of equality for the poor; you are the poet of all that is good; the poet of love. That is why you are the poet of the people. It is you who have created a unique confluence between the contemporary and traditional. You have been totally non-communal, not just in your speech, but from your innermost being. You have inspired the youth with humanism and liberal ideals. At a time when Bengali nation was steeped in communalism, your writings were carefully aimed at creating unity, spiritual strength. It is our misfortune that you have been silent for a long thirty-two years. We are deprived of your bold creative wealth. The Bengali nation is forever grateful to be inheritors of the rich creative wealth you have produced over two decades. The nation prays that you recover your health. We are indeed honoured today to be able to express our deep respect for you”⁵¹

⁴⁹ Abdul Muquit Chowdhury, *Shesh Salam*, Nazrul Academy Patrika, Dhaka, 1977.

⁵⁰ Dhanmondi is one of the most affluent residential areas in Dhaka city. Dhanmondi is well known for its lake, the entire area is surrounded by this lake. Nazrul’s house is now partly used by the Nazrul Institute and part of it has been converted as the Nazrul Museum.

⁵¹ Rafiqul Islam, *Nojrul Jiboni*, p. 472.

However, this love and respect towards the poet was soon to come to an abrupt end. The entire scenario changed and changed for the worse after Mujibur Rahman's assassination. The poet was shifted from his Dhanmandi bungalow to a small cabin in Civil hospital. Reportedly, an army officer liked the bungalow where the poet had been staying and he used the pretext of Nazrul's "deteriorating condition" to remove the poet to a small cabin in the hospital where the speechless poet reportedly indicated his unhappiness through gestures. The poet continued to stay here till he breathed his last on 29th August 1976. Rafiqul Islam narrates the last journey of the poet in these words – "As the news of poet's death circulated, people began to pour in large numbers to pay their last respects. This was the largest *namaaz-e-janaza* in the nation's history. The President of Bangladesh, members of the advisory council, senior military and civil bureaucrats, foreign diplomats, political leaders and innumerable poets, writers and artistes joined the *namaz-e-janaza*. After the *janaza*, the poet's body was carried to the Dhaka University mosque grounds. Carrying the body were the President himself, Army Chief Major General Ziaur Rahman, Navy Chief rear Admiral MH Khan and Air Force Chief Air vice Marshall AG Mahmud. At five in the afternoon, the poet was buried with full state and military honours"⁵². The Bangladeshi flag was flown at half-mast. The day was declared a national holiday followed by two days of national mourning. What transpired from here was no less than a suspense thriller. A thriller spiraled around the corpse of a poet. The Bangladesh Deputy High Commissioner, posted in Calcutta informed the dead poet's family members. It was also conveyed to them that the government of Bangladesh had made all arrangements for their travel to Dhaka⁵³.

Nazrul's wife Late Promila's last wish was to have her husband's grave besides her own. It is also said that a space was well reserved for the poet's grave besides his wife's⁵⁴ (in Churulia). To keep their mother's last wish, Nazrul's sons requested the Bangladesh government to also make an arrangement to bring their father's body back

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Arun Kumar Basu, *Nojrul Jiboni*, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 2000, p. 532

⁵⁴ Kalpataru Sengupta, *Janagoner Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam*, West Bengal State Book Board, Calcutta, 1999, pp. 201-204.

to their native land⁵⁵. The Bangladesh Deputy High Commissioner had assured the family of the arrangements. On this side of the border, that is in West Bengal, once the news of Nazrul's demise spread, people suddenly woke up from slumber. After almost thirty years, Nazrul's absence was realized by his Indian followers.

The members of the West Bengal Nazrul Academy⁵⁶ also pressurized the Government in West Bengal to bring the dead poet back. Siddharth Shankar Ray (Chief Minister of West Bengal) and Subrata Mukherjee (Cultural affairs Minister of West Bengal) were approached by various cultural organizations in the state to take up the matter seriously. The Chief Minister agreed to take the matter up to the Prime Minister. In the mean time, the Cultural Minister, Subrata Mukherjee issued a press release. The press release assured the Indian population that the poet shall be brought back.

Things surely looked positive on the diplomatic front; whereas the ground reality was completely upsetting. The flight by which Nazrul's family was to travel to Dhaka got delayed by hours⁵⁷. Technical glitch was to be blamed for this delay. Once they boarded the flight, it did not take off immediately – there was further delay⁵⁸. The bereaved sons hopelessly waited to get a glimpse of their father for the final time. Nazrul was surely not an ordinary man. It was a special flight arranged at an international diplomatic level to expedite the formalities. Nazrul, when alive, was taken to Dhaka with complete State honour. And he was to be returned with equal respect, if not more! But none of this happened. It was a mockery made out of the corpse of the poet. Upon their arrival in Dhaka, they were struck with utter dismay to find that their father's last rites were already concluded. The poet was buried in the Dhaka University premises.

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ An institution set up by the West Bengal government to carry forward the legacy of the poet.

⁵⁷ Kalpataru Sengupta, op.cit, pp. 201-201

⁵⁸ Arun Kumar Basu, op.cit, pp. 531-535.

Going a little back in time, while the poet was still alive, Nazrul was happy with his stay in Dhaka⁵⁹. Given his marginal improvement in health, the family here in Calcutta never thought of bringing him back. The Indian government on the other hand had quite evidently forgotten to claim their 'Bengali Muslim' poet back. To repeat myself again, all went well till the military power overthrew the Mujib government. The inexperienced Mujib government had failed to deliver all the promises made during their freedom movement. The counter-revolutionary forces were active all over the Bangladesh and the troubles of the new regime was multiplied by a famine in the country in 1974, significant rise in international oil prices, low productivity and growing inflation⁶⁰.

In August 1975, Mujibur Rahman and his family were assassinated. Military rule took over and Khondkar Mustaq Ahmed was declared the new president. The saga over Nazrul's body happened at this juncture of Bangladeshi politics, at a crucial point in time where democratic-secularist government was passed over to authoritarian-military dictatorship. Like any new government this military regime too required to prove its legitimacy. It still had to win over its population. Nazrul's death made things absolutely conducive for the struggling government to charm its people; an opportunity that the military regime could not have missed. The nascent state was still looking forward to creating its own history, own identity, something different from its shared past with the neighbouring (parent) countries. The poet's death seemed like a prized moment when the national sentiment played in favour of the military regime. Nazrul was already a national icon by now. A monument over his grave could give the nation a national monument.

Cutting the long story short, by the time Nazrul's family arrived in Dhaka, they were shocked to see that the poet's last rites were already done and he was buried near the mosque at the University grounds of Dhaka. It becomes reasonably clear that Nazrul's burial was decided amongst the highest officials/diplomats of Bangladesh. Fearing

⁵⁹ I say that he was happy because of the improvement in his health. Apparently, the poet used to walk, take a stroll in the lawn, enjoyed his cup of tea. I, however, do not make the claim that he was happy because he was in Dhaka. In all probability it was the spacious set-up of his house that led to his happiness.

⁶⁰ Arun Kumar Basu, op.cit, p. 549.

that any news of Nazrul's burial in Dhaka would raise objection, their Indian counterparts were kept completely under the dark. Going by Indian citizenship rights, Nazrul's last rites were to be conducted in Burdwan (West Bengal), following his last wishes. "It is also an international convention that the body of a person, who died outside his country, is sent to his own native country. For such transportation various airlines make special provisions and often they do not charge any freight"⁶¹. Nazrul and his family members were denied all of these rights. The Bangladesh government maintained a stoic silence over the issue. This entire burial episode became even more significant when the Bangladesh government declared Nazrul as their National poet, moments after the burial – at the burial ground. A national monument was erected; a new identity was created – all at the cost of a corpse of a poet.

When being the 'people's poet' Infuriated the Guardians of Bengali literature in the 1920s - Questioning the many 'ism-s' through the Realm of Literature

Rabindranath Tagore (May 7, 1861- August 7, 1941) is synonymous to Bengali literature. Probably it is the first name that comes to most of us when asked about literature in the country. And why wouldn't it be – after all he won India the Nobel Prize for literature as early as in 1913. Such was Gurudeb⁶²'s influence that he was one name to reckon with. When you have someone of his stature, it is expected that there would be other litterateurs following his path, his style of writing – following him blindly. He set a trend in Bengali literature that most authors wanted to imitate. That was the literary scenario of Bengal in the late 19th and early 20th century. Though, not everybody followed him, we always have an exception. Tagore appeared to have the last word, he had the authority – to settle any literary dispute – to accept or reject any literary trend.

With the changing political scenario, there came a change in the literary world too. Nazrul's rise in the literary world also facilitated this change. Nazrul, though an ardent follower of Tagore, chose to write differently. Nazrul's writing was loud and boisterous, as opposed to Tagore subtle style. As would be the situation in any field,

⁶¹ Sajal Nag, op.cit, pp. 5186-5188

⁶² Rabindranath Tagore is popularly and affectionately called 'Gurudeb'.

Nazrul's meteoric rise was not going down well among many of Tagore's followers. And before anybody knew, there were two literary groups competing against each other – Tagore's group and Nazrul's group. These two groups came out with their own literary magazines with the sole motive of validating their individual standpoints. Neither Tagore nor Nazrul were actually a part of any of these groups. These groups were self declared guardians of Bengali literature. The table given below will help us understand the rather complex factions of Bengali literature -

Name of the Literary Magazine	Followers of -	Time period	Name of the Prominent Members	Allies of Shonibarar Chithi and Kallol
Shonibarar Chithi	Rabindranath Tagore	July 1924 – 1930.	Ashok Chattopadhyay, Amal Home, Jogananda Das, Sajani Kanta Das.	Probas, Bharoti.
Kallol	Kazi Nazrul Islam	April, 1923 – 1930.	Premendra Mitra, Buddhadeb Basu, Achintyakumar Sengupta, Gokulchandra Nag.	Uttara (1925), Pragati (1926), Kali - kolom (1926), Progoti (1925)

These custodians of 20th century Bengali literature left no stone unturned to humiliate each other. At the very onset I need to mention that Rabindranath Tagore mostly remained away from any of these controversies, both physically and otherwise. Tagore was either in Shantiniketan or travelling foreign lands during the 1920s. Tagore being away gave the pro-Tagore group a greater leeway in attacking their opponents.

Before we discuss the literary blame-game, let us first take a look at the equation shared by the two literary heads, Tagore and Nazrul. As I mentioned earlier, Nazrul was an ardent admirer of Tagore. Similarly, Tagore also always welcomed this young new poet's contribution in the sphere of Bengali literature. It was 1922, just before commencing the publication of Dhumketu, Nazrul requested Tagore to write a welcome note for his upcoming literary journal. Tagore accepted Nazrul's request and wrote –

“Come, O Dhumketu the Comet, come along!
Build a bridge of fire over the sea of darkness,
Do unfurl your banner of victory
On top of the fort of hard times!

Let the sign of evil omen
Be drawn on the night’s forehead,
But go ahead striking with a flash of light
To awaken those who are half-conscious”⁶³

When Nazrul was put behind the bars, under the charges of sedition, due to his anti-colonial writings in *Dhumketu*, Tagore dedicated his new musical drama ‘Basanto’ to Nazrul Islam. The message read –

“Dedication,
To the illustrious poet Nazrul Islam,
an object of special affection”⁶⁴

It did not just end here, Tagore asked his close aid Pabitra Gangopadhyay to personally carry a signed copy of ‘Basanto’ all the way to Nazrul in Alipur Jail (Kolkata); though this copy never reached Nazrul as by then he was shifted to Behrampur Jail. In yet another instance, during Nazrul imprisonment tenure, when Nazrul went on a hunger strike for 38 days Tagore sent him a telegram. Tagore requested the young poet to give up his hunger strike and said –

“give up your strike, our literature claims you!”

Very different from the general assumption, Tagore and Nazrul shared an amicable relationship, where both had created their own space and welcomed each other’s view on literature. The entire array of controversies began when Shonibarar Chithi started printing parodies of Nazrul’s poems and songs. Shonibarar Chithi did not restrict themselves to just Nazrul rather their crusade was against every Kallol group member; anybody who thought and wrote differently from Tagore. The Chithi group criticised the new literary trend on three counts –

- For its advocacy of rebellion
- For its interest in the downtrodden

⁶³ Rabindranath Tagore, *Dhumketu*, Vol. 1, No.1, 11th August 1922, p. 2.

⁶⁴ Reproduced in Rafiqul Islam, Kazi Nazrul Islam - *Jibon o Kobita*, p. 110

- For its explicit portrayal of human sexuality⁶⁵

The deep-seated notion of a 'bhadramahila', a product of the Victorian morality, seems to have been challenged by the new-literature. The Bengali urban middle class, which epitomised the bhadralok-bhadramahila phenomenon was clearly uncomfortable with the advent of sexually overt writings of the Kallol group. The new-age literature directly attacked their moral conscience. Nazrul's 'Madhobi Prolap', 'Gopon Priya' and 'Anamika' were three such poems which shook the torchbearers of Tagorian tradition. A few lines from Anamika –

“Prem ek premika se bohu,
Bohu patre dhele pibo sei prem-
Se sharab lohu.
Tomare koribo pan, anamika, shato kamonay,
Bhringare, gelase kobhu, kobhu peyalay!

(Love is one, lovers are many,
I shall drink that love – that blood-wine
Pouring it in countless containers,
I shall drink you, my nameless love, in a hundred desires,
in a jug, in a mug, in a cup,
every now and then”

Shonibarar Chithi went on to say that the new literature had no originality as they had been highly influenced by the absolute-realism trend of European literature of late 19th and early 20th century. However, none of these criticisms could stop the new-age literature. They were undeterred from their path.

Till this point, neither Tagore nor Nazrul were party to this entire controversy. None of them had openly either supported or opposed any particular literary trend. It all started when Tagore wrote an article called 'Sahityadharmo' was published in Bichitra, July-August 1927. 'Sahityadharmo' accused the new literary series of an 'imported style', characterised by noise and crudity. In this article, nonetheless, Tagore refrained from accusing the Kallol group of nudity or sexuality. He based his opinion only on what he considered to be the valid principles of literature as a genre of art. This article by Tagore though did not create any impact on the Kallol group,

⁶⁵ These three objections were published in Shonibarar Chithi's special edition. Quoted in Sajani Kanta Das, *Atmosmriti*, Subarnarekha, Kolkata, pp. 119-20

but surely raised the tempo of the *Shanibar* group. There was yet another instance where Tagore's stance on the new literature came out clearly. Tagore's 'Rayater Katha' (Peasants' Story) came out as a response to Pramatha Choudhuri's article by the same name – 'Rayater Katha'. Rabindranath Tagore's commentary on Choudhuri's article was published in *Sobuj Patra* (Green Leaves) in June, 1926. "While expressing genuine sympathy for the tillers of the land, voicing indignance at the failure of national politicians to incorporate the peasants' problems in their programme, and appreciating Choudhuri's attempt to highlight this most important fact of Indian economy, Tagore took care to forbid any violent and revolutionary solution to the problem of land tenure"⁶⁶.

The tussle between the two groups went completely out of hand when Tagore added his remarks to the ongoing fight. In a speech delivered on 13th Dec 1927, at Rabindra Parishad of Presidency College, Tagore made some unwelcoming remarks about the new age literature. An excerpt from the speech is as follows –

“...Sedin kono ek jon bangali hindu kobi-r kabye dekhlum, tini rakto shobder jaygaye byabohar korechen 'khood'. Puraton 'rakto' shobde tar kabye ranga rang jodi na dhore ta hole bhujbo, seta-tey tar awkrititway. Tini rang lagatey paren na bolei takk lagatey chan.... Ami torun bolbo tander-e jader kalpanar aakash chiro puraton rakto raagey, arun borney, shohoje nobin, choron rangabar jonney jander usha ke new market-ey 'khood' formaish kortey hoina. Ami sei torun der ei bondhu, tader boyesh jotoi prachin hokk....”⁶⁷

He particularly referred to the use of the word 'khood' by a 'Hindu poet' in place of the traditionally used Sanskrit-Bangla word 'rakta'⁶⁸. The pro-Tagore group found this golden opportunity to publish the entire speech in their magazine and so did their tributary journals. However, these magazines/journals deliberately omitted the word 'Hindu' from the first line where the actual reference was to a 'Hindu poet'. As anybody would feel Nazrul too thought that the speech and the reference to the word 'khood' were directed against him. Nazrul, who was known to have extensively used

⁶⁶Rabindranath Tagore, *Rayater Katha*, Rabindra Rachnaboli, Centenary edn, 15 vols, Government of West Bengal, Kolkata, 1961-6, Vol. 13, pp. 345-50.

⁶⁷ *Kobir Obhibhason*, Rabindra Rachnaboli, Centenary edn, 15 vols, Government of West Bengal, Kolkata, 1961-6, Vol.14, pp. 391-5

⁶⁸Ibid

Perso-Arabic words in his poetries, was deeply hurt. Nazrul wrote an elaborate article as a rejoinder to Tagore's attacks on the new literature. Nazrul's article called '*Bador Piriti Balir Bandh*' appeared in '*Atmoshokti*' on 30th December 1927⁶⁹.

Nazrul wrote an elaborate article trying to clear his stand on the supposed accusations made on him. Nazrul questioned Tagore's objection to the word 'khood' stating that Tagore himself had borrowed elaborately from the Perso-Arabic vocabulary. Nazrul pointed out that the vastness of the Muslim readership in Bengal and to the existing syncretic tradition of rural Bengal. Much of Nazrul's rejoinder also consisted of the comparisons that he drew between his own and Tagore's economic standards; narrating how financially frail he was and whatever he wrote on the poor and poverty was out of his own day to day life experiences. Nazrul spelt out his position by saying that he used the word 'khood' not to give an Islamic/Muslim or socialist colour to it.

The matter clearly went beyond anybody's imagination and called for a third party intervention to pacify the two poets at loggerheads. And as the situation demanded, Pramatha Choudhuri⁷⁰ came up with his article '*Bango Sahitye Khuner Mamla*' published in *Atmoshokti*, February 1928⁷¹. Pramatha Choudhuri pointed out that Tagore's comment was directed towards an aspiring poet and not towards a well-established poet like Nazrul. He also showcased how the word 'khood' had certain advantage over 'rakto' in poetical language⁷². After Pramatha Choudhuri's mediation the matter had been resolved. There was no further discussion on this matter. Both Tagore and Nazrul were back to their earlier equation of their mutual respect to each other. Years later Nazrul had once again requested Tagore to write a welcome note for a new magazine '*Nagorik*'. And without any delay Tagore had replied back to Nazrul in a heart warming letter⁷³. When Tagore passed away, Nazrul

⁶⁹ *Bador Piriti Balir Bandh*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, Vol.4, pp. 23-9.

⁷⁰ Pramatha Choudhuri was Rabindranath Tagore's relative and an eminent writer himself.

⁷¹ *Bango Sahitye Khuner Mamla*, reproduced in Mustafa Nurul Islam's, *Samokale Nojrul*, pp.359-63.

⁷² 'Khood' could be easily matched and used for new metres, rhythm and rhyme in Bengali writings.

⁷³ Rafiqul Islam, *Nojrul Jiboni*, pp. 234-5.

took it as a personal loss and dedicated a poem (Robi Hara) to pay homage to the departed soul.

To conclude the entire controversy then, we ought to answer some commonly raised questions about this episode, featuring Shanibarar Chithi and Tagore on one side and the Kallol group and Nazrul on the other. Questions like – was this controversy completely political? Was this a product of the rising Hindu chauvinism in Bengal? Was Rabindranath Tagore turning communal? Questions like these need to be answered. To me, this whole thing appears to be partly political and partly literary. It was a purely ‘literary’ fight from Tagore’s side, Tagore states it in an article published in *Bangla Katha* in March 1928. This article was published after Tagore called for a grand conference at his Jorasanko (in Kolkata) residence. This conference was aimed at clearing all the misunderstandings created between the two factions of Bengali literature⁷⁴. Tagore in this article emphasised on the distinctive features of literature on one hand, and the distinctive features of society on the other. Tagore declared that in his recent statements he was clearly concerned only about literature and not about society⁷⁵. In yet another article Tagore reiterated that literature is a creation of an individual and not of a society. Similarly, literature should not be ‘age-bound’ – it has to be ageless and should not be bound by time bound. Significantly, Tagore condemned the act of Shonibarar Chithi in only finding faults in the new literary trend and failing to see the positives. Rabindranath Tagore made his position fairly clear. His motive was literary and should not be read otherwise. Nonetheless, one needs to mention here that there were some members in the Shonibarar Chithi group who advocated political interests through their literary endeavours.

I am here referring to Sajani Kanta Das’ ‘Shuddhi Andolon’ article. Initially Das wanted to publish it in *Shonibarar Chithi* but was stopped from doing so by his other seniors and colleagues. Later Das went on to publish it in ‘Hindu Sangho’ in October,

⁷⁴Rabindranath Tagore, *Sahityorup*, Rabindra Rachnaboli, Centenary edn, 15 vols, Government of West Bengal, Kolkata, 1961-6, Vol. 13, pp. 395-403.

⁷⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, *Sahityosamalochana*, Rabindra Rachnaboli, Centenary edn, 15 vols, Government of West Bengal, Kolkata, 1961-6, Vol. 13, pp. 404-11.

1926⁷⁶. Sajani Kanta Das' accused C.R. Das's 'Hindu-Muslim Pact' of appeasing the Muslim population. He was also highly critical of the Communists in Bengal. Sajani Kanta Das did not just stop there. He went on to write a five-act Drama called 'Kochi-o-Kancha' (Young and Tender) intending to spill venom over the Bengal Communists. This Drama was to be serialised in *Shonibarar Chithi* (August, 1927). The Drama had caricatured representation of Nazrul Islam, Soumendranath Tagore and Muzaffar Ahmad. It carried parodies of Nazrul's 'Samya' (Equality) writings. This drama had created quite a stir in the literary circuit of Bengal. The content of the Drama was highly objectionable. When Tagore realised the gravity of the matter, he immediately interfered and stopped any further publication of the Drama⁷⁷.

Thus, like I said before, this entire war of words was partly literary and partly political. From Tagore's point of view – his contribution in this controversy was from a purely literary point of view. Neither was he turning communal nor was he a Hindu chauvinist. Followers of Tagore like Sajani Kanta Das might have used Tagore's name to justify their position, but in the end Tagore clarified his stance, loud and clear. The political scenario in Bengal was changing and so was the literary genre. The new age litterateurs used their literary tool to voice their opinion which was not acceptable to the former group. The many questions of colonialism, communism and communalism were interpreted in a changing manner over time through the realm of literature.

⁷⁶ Sajani Kanta Das, *Atmosmriti*, pp. 172-83.

⁷⁷ Ibid

Chapter – 6

The ‘rebel’ Poet – Nazrul Islam

The study set out to explore the idea behind calling Nazrul Islam a ‘rebel’ poet. The study has also sought to critically examine the poet’s socio-political and religious ideology. The general historiography on this subject and specifically in the context of Nazrul’s identity as a National Poet is inconclusive on several vital questions. In this concluding chapter I would like to argue, yet again, why I find the description ‘rebel’ does not do full justice to Nazrul’s body of work.

Through this research I have sought to bring into light one of the most remarkable Indian poets of all time, his contribution in the social and intellectual history of the 20th century Bengal. In these six chapters I have tried to bring to the public a humanist whose thinking touched on almost every major aspect of human concerns. Nazrul was a poet who combined what came from his heart with what he learnt with a sharp observant mind. Never did he attempt to please any particular section in the society or to hurt them. He wrote whatever he felt was correct and appropriate to make society a just one. A few lines from the poem ‘Amar Koifiyat’ shows Nazrul in a self deprecating manner, express the conflict of the heart and the mind.

“I say to myself: “listen, you mad-cap!
You are doing quite well for yourself now.
You are almost a ‘half-leader’,
If you miss this opportunity,
You may never become a ‘full-leader’,
To show people your tears during your speech
Be sure to carry some chilli powder in your pocket!
While you can – also get your leaky roof repaired
Otherwise you’ll end up repenting”.

But my mind doesn’t understand all that.
Instead it goes on wandering across the land
Singing like a minstrel”¹

Nazrul declared his commitment towards life and vowed to work in his own way to fight against hunger and disease. Nazrul was firm in his view that it was not his only

¹ *Amar Koifiyat*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, Vol.2, p.133.

job to portray the beauty in his poetry; his responsibility was equally to change the age-old unjust order of the society. He said -

“My heart is burning with pain,
I’ve gone mad by seeing all this
And I say whatever comes to my tongue
I write it all,
Deep sadness prevents big thoughts and big words
From entering my head
So, it’s up to you friends – who are
Happy to write the immortal poems”²

The epithet ‘Bidrohi’ (The Rebel) was conferred upon Nazrul on the publication of his poem by the same name. However, one of the aims of this thesis has been to look more closely at this and to situate it historically.

In my understanding, for Nazrul, ‘rebellion’ not only meant rejection and protest but also a process of creation. The poem ‘Bidrohi’ is Universalist in spirit, an invocation to all individuals to view more justly and humanely, the plight of the powerless and the oppressed. Nazrul Islam’s poetry reveals a very lofty sense of individualism and the dignity of man. At times he has refused to bow down before any power or authority, however great, not excepting the Creator. Nazrul challenged all such powers in society which exploited the individual. He even challenged the Almighty in the very first paragraph of his poem, Bidrohi – “I tower far above the infinite spaces of universe, above the sun, moon, planets and stars, above the seat of heaven itself. I yield to none in submission”.

To Nazrul Islam, freedom was a broader concept just than political freedom; it included freedom from stifling rules and conventions. He worked to celebrate man’s natural freedom and to restore to him his dignity and self-awareness. Affirming one’s own individuality does at points of time require rebellion against oppressive societal norms³. Hence being this ‘individual’ was not being a ‘rebel’. Nazrul Islam used firm

² Ibid.

³ It could be a rebellion, in face of a social persecution. One has to see this aspect in the context of any debate between the rights of the individual vs. obligations towards the society. In majority of Nazrul’s writings, (though an exception was Bidrohi, where he suggests a radical reordering of society) did not hamper the obligations towards the society. His appeal towards individual rights was limited to one’s

language to express himself; outspoken words were chosen to put forward each and every opinion.

Nazrul was always responsive to the contemporary (political and social) issues and wrote on most of these. He added to Bengali poetry its note of contemporaneity which greatly helped in the bringing Bengali poetry closer to life. His career as a journalist also contributed to his literary writings. To contemporary readers, the appeal of these essays was enormous; for the government on the other hand, these were so disturbing as to prompt punitive action. Nazrul Islam's journalism went far beyond the limits of contemporary issues he had to comment on, because while dealing with local issues he also raised issues that were larger and universal.

As Nazrul Islam himself put it in the last speech of his life, 'If the Flute doesn't Play Anymore?': "From the ocean as I rose as dark clouds during stormy nights bringing repeated lighting and roaring thunder across the sky, I also quenched the thirst of the earth with abundant rain. There are some who saw only my dance of destruction. But the same restless dark clouds did not just come with drums and horns of destruction, but also with tears of compassion that made flowers of love, the lotus and plants blossom and the wilderness flourish. The same clouds brought a flood of joy, jingling of anklet-bells, and resonance of divine melody and stream of songs"⁴. And interestingly, Nazrul's love-lyrics were composed simultaneously with his poems on agitational politics. Revolt, is only an extreme, exceptional and short-lived dimension in the entire gamut of people's experiences. It provides a convenient starting-point only because it tends to be so much better documented. In popular imagination, Nazrul is complex and multi-faceted and his work is multidimensional. The epithet 'bidrohi' has somehow stuck to Nazrul; overshadowing the vastly more complex and varied nature of this contribution.

own self, without infringing into the rights of the other. Nazrul's attempt was towards the social well-being.

⁴ *Jodi ar Banshi Na Baje*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Vol.5, pp.544. On 5th and 6th April, 1941, at the Calcutta Muslim Institute Hall, the Bengal Literary Association held its silver jubilee celebration. As the president of this celebration Kazi Nazrul Islam delivered this speech, "Jodi Ar Banshi na Baje". It was the last speech of his life.

Nazrul's metamorphosis from a folk-based leto poet to an ever uncompromising dissenting self in the dual guise of a writer and a fighter, who eventually won the crown of the National Poet of a newly-emerged nation-state called Bangladesh, remains a most enigmatic field of literary and historical investigation to an inquisitive researcher; attempting to conceptualize the intricate personality of one of the most prolific creative talents of the East.

Effortlessness is, perhaps, the most suitable term, to the reproductive and regenerative process within Nazrul, since he began as a local prodigy the art of improvising rhymed arguments and counter-arguments on Leto stage. This is what a leto poet is expected to perform by an artful combination of word-play and body-lore, in a bid to mesmerize his listeners. The skill requires not only an unquestionable presence of mind, but witty interaction of emotion and wisdom, mostly derived from hearsay, legends, tales, scriptures and other common sources of folk experience and intuition within human reach. Thus spontaneity remains a key-word combining all other skills and tactics to a debating poet in Leto. This spontaneity of the Leto tradition Nazrul maintained all his life, working in most of the literary genres (poetry, fiction, drama, essay etc) with an untiring vigour indicative of emotional exuberance, not caring much for academically acquired intellectual disciplines.

Rough and tough, he was never tired of bursting into a wild, innocent laughter - an attribute that attracted a ready crowd of admirers wherever he stepped in. An eloquent speaker and relentless singer, he was astonishingly loved by people from all faiths and traits, regardless of their caste, creed, age and sex. A mixture of such simplicity and spontaneity in the making of him as a creative writer also gave him a deceptive identity of an immature adolescent, rather a 'talented-boy', in the eye of a few high-brow literary critics apart from inviting, for obvious political reasons, utter detestations from British colonial rulers.

Bangladesh's National Poet is unique. First – given the fact that Nazrul Islam is reputed to be the poet of restlessness, of outspoken and uncompromising revolutionary opposition against injustice; granted the fact that he sincerely believed in the need for revolutionary destruction as precursor to society's rebuilding – it is remarkable that, at the same time, Nazrul Islam was a champion of Bengal's

centuries' old culture. As has been argued in this research, the poet/writer is reputed not just to have been acquainted with a variety of non-Islamic, religio-cultural traditions, including the Hindu mythological scriptures, but also have created numerous poems and songs using imagery and symbols drawn from these traditions. The use of the title 'rebel poet' to characterize him hides the fact that, Nazrul was no iconoclast or avant-guardist. Far from it – he held Bengal's cultural heritage in deep respect, and had an impressive capacity for using forms derived from that prolonged tradition. This is widely acknowledged by Bengali authors and cultural critics.

Nazrul's juxtaposition of Gods, Goddesses and Prophetic religious personalities from diverse religions is as characteristic as his emphasis on a devotional commitment to a loving God. Nazrul's choices, when he was engaged in syncretistic intermingling and in his mystic search, were partly inspired by contemporary realities – the need to respond to the growing Hindu – Muslim divide in Bengal, in the early 20th century. It is evident that in his literary choices, Nazrul placed himself in the pattern set by Bengal's cultural history, and did so in interest of defending religious tolerance. One of Nazrul's distinguishing marks is that he combined an emphasis on syncretism with mysticism, in line with the culture that had helped sustain religious tolerance for centuries in Bengal.

Lastly, Nazrul took his idea of religious tolerance and his approach of the political Left together in his vision of human emancipation. At no point in his literary career did Nazrul Islam feel the need to counter religion. In short, a review of Nazrul Islam's literary work is very helpful in rethinking the politics of secularism and religious tolerance.

Nazrul appeared in the literary realm of Bangla language nearly like a meteor based on his *Bidrohi*. The ode not only made him a celebrity at once, but also the tag 'rebel' poet got stuck with his name, even though it captures only one aspect of his panoramic personality. It is the revolutionary side that gave the limelight. However, this collective revolt against all kinds of inequality, oppression and coercion – regardless of who is the executor and who is the victim – was just one aspect of his belief. That is where the contrasting aspects of his thought and work become

particularly pertinent. Given below are some of the contrasting and juxtaposed ideas from the world of Nazrul.

Example I – *Hul O Ful*⁵ [Sting (Bee) and Flower] : Hul O Ful is the title of one of his poems, in which he tried to explain that in a situation of domination, pretense and heartlessness, there is a corresponding need for both flower (bouquet) and sting.

Example II – *Baansh O Baanshi* (Bamboo stick and Flute): In Bangla, *baansh* points to an unfinished weapon made from bamboo for causing pain, while *baanshi* (also made from bamboo) is flute, an instrument to celebrate love, music and beauty. In an essay, Nazrul tactfully juxtaposed both to propose annotations on current issues.

“Those who have been expressing disgust at politics, I myself was taken aback by their sudden attraction to those bamboos of *benu-bon* (cluster of bamboos in a field), let alone what might the outsiders be thinking.Of course, you can try to make a few holes in a bamboo to make it play like a flute. Yet, its roughness and the hurt it inflicts tell you that it is a bamboo and not a flute. When you see someone more deserving of playing flute are now swirling bamboo sticks, it makes one feel sad, but also makes one feel like laughing”⁶.

Example III – Fair and Foul (fowl)⁷ : Nazrul’s compositions of essays, poems are often a sheer delight to read. In one of his speeches, he mentioned –

“One day I saw a person returning from the market while holding a hen in one hand and some Tuberoses (rajanigandha) flowers in the other. I complimented him saying “I have never seen such a combination of Fair and Foul (fowl) together”.

“...I vividly remember my feeling and realization of this one day in life. My son passed away. My heart was broken at this loss. Right then Hasna-hena (a flower) bloomed in my house. I smelled the fragrance of those to my heart’s delight. That’s the way to enjoy life – that’s living a full life. My poetry and music have emanated from my life experience. I want to state emphatically – I have lived my life fully. I have never dreaded pain or suffering. I have dived into the ocean waves of life”⁸.

Example IV – *Ronoturjo O Baanshori* (Bugle and Flute) - Nazrul writes “In one hand of mine is the tender flute, while in the other I hold the war bugle”. Nazrul described this juxtaposition in one more situation in the following words –

“To bloom flowers is my religion. Sword may be a burden in my hand, but I have not discarded it. I play flute with the young cattle-herders during the dusk, I give Azan at dawn

⁵ *Hul O Ful*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, Vol.5, pp. 12.

⁶ *Boror piriti balir baandh*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, Vol.4, pp. 23-9

⁷ In the original text, these English words were used.

⁸ *Swadhin Chittotar Jagoron*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, Vol.4, p. 566.

adding my voice to the Muazzin, I also jump into the battlefield with my unsheathed sword during the bright noon. My flute then becomes the trumpet of battle. My music is for the beauty, and the sword is for those monsters who endanger the beauty”⁹.

Nazrul was a messenger of liberating the human spirit, of universal brotherhood, of valour and dignity, of harmony and amity among all, of unity and cooperation, of what is just, of what is true and beautiful, of love and compassion, of non-dogmatic and non-fanatic. Even though Nazrul’s voice was for both rebellion and love for beauty, the label of ‘the rebel poet’, led to only one dimension of him became highlighted.

The rebel in Nazrul struggled hard against disparity, domination, dictatorship, colonialism, hypocrisy and religious fanaticism. The humanist in him strove for equal opportunity, autonomy, righteousness, love, optimism, harmony and amity. He was a man of his own time, but these ideals were universal ones, for people have not significantly transformed today from Nazrul’s time. His words are as important today as they were in his own time.

⁹ *Bangla Sahitye Musalman*, NRS, Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, Vol.1, p. 427

APPENDIX

**Kazi Nazrul Islam's Medical Reports as reproduced in Nazrul
Institute's Archival Records (Dhaka)**

Telegrams : "MENTHOSP"
Kanke
Telephone No. RANCHI 91
D.O.K.

6918
X-8(M)-h-WB

INTER-PROVINCIAL MENTAL HOSPITAL
P. O. KANKE, RANCHI,
BIHAR, INDIA.

The 17 June, 1952

Dear Dr. Adhikari

In reply to your note dated 14th June, 1952, I have examined the Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam on 14th June, 1952, at his residence. I found him suffering from general Paresis of a very long duration. It might be possible to improve his condition to some extent by adequate Penicillin and Fever Therapy. But before this is done it would be advisable to examine the extent of damage by means of Electro-Encephalograph and by testing his Cerebro-spinal Fluid. For these investigations and treatments it would be essential for the poet to be in Hospital and I have suggested that he might be admitted to this Hospital as a 3rd class paying patient in accordance with the regulations in the attached Prospectus. He is able to sign his name and therefore he will be a Voluntary patient. As he is so well-known as a Bengali no Domicile Certificate will be necessary in his case. It will however be necessary to have a certificate from the Magistrate to the effect that he or his family cannot afford to pay more than Rs.50/- p.m. for his maintenance charges.

If it is so desired, we can also admit the poet's wife as a Neurological case. She is suffering from Syphilitic Transverse Myelitis. They can occupy the same room. In view of patient's contribution towards Bengali culture I might add that we would accommodate him in a cottage or in a single cabin.

Yours sincerely,

R. B. Davis
(R. B. Davis).

Dr. R. L. Adhikari, M.B., H.R.C.P., T.D.D. (Wales)
32, Creek Row,
Calcutta-14.

Figure 1 - Appendix 1 - Ranchi Mental Hospital's Medical Report on Kazi Nazrul's Health Condition. Report by Dr. R.B Davis (17th June 1952).

MEDICAL ADVISER TO
THE H. C. FOR INDIA

24 JUN 1953

887.

DR. WILLIAM SARGANT.

TELEPHONE:
MUSEUM 5161.

23, HARLEY STREET,
W.1.

23rd June 1953

Dear Colonel Pasricha,

This is a preliminary report on Nazrul Islam whom we saw together at Mitcham on 20-6-53.

I am not going to deal with his neurological status as I believe that one or two eminent neurologists are also being called in and they will be able to express the opinion as to whether or not he has the neurological signs that would be expected from a long-standing case of G.P.I. which had had penicillin treatment.

There is also no need for me to go into the detailed history of this patient as it is already known to those concerned. In essence, however, he appears to have been a man of considerable physical and mental strength, capable of high literary output prior to his illness, since he is reported to have produced nearly fifty books and his poems contributed greatly to maintaining the morale of his countrymen at a critical period in their destiny.

One of the people who have accompanied him from India and knows his life history well is quite certain that around 1939-1941, and before his acute breakdown, Nazrul Islam was starting to exhibit erratic behaviour and sometimes almost grandiose and messianic ideas. He became acutely ill mentally in 1942, was seen by a physician who found a positive Wassermann in the blood, but there is no record of the C.S.F. at that time, and he was put on tryparsamide. He continued acutely mentally ill and sometimes having to be restrained in his own house because of his acutely excited and deluded state till 1945. There is a history that malaria treatment, which was suggested during this period, was refused by those concerned. In 1945 the Wassermann reaction was still found to be positive and there is a history of a C.S.F. being taken and also found to be positive, though no details of this are present in his records. At that time he was treated with eight million units of penicillin.

Gradually the excitement has subsided and for the past few years this patient has led a somewhat vegetable-like existence. His friend reports that two or three years ago he was sometimes able to write a few lines of his own poetry, and a few months ago was able to recognise and name a prominent politician.

Figure 2- Appendix 2 - Kazi Nazrul Islam Medical Report, addressed to Colonel Dr. Pasricha (Medical Adviser to High Commissioner for India). Report by - Dr. William Sargant (23rd June, 1953, London)

in Bengal who came to visit him. However, he now never speaks a coherent sentence, occasionally shows mild attacks of excitement and irritation, eats most of the food given to him, smears his faeces round the room when he goes to the toilet, and in other ways shows evidence of a profound degree of intellectual and emotional deterioration. He does observe what goes on around him, but the nurse who is looking after him for the past six months, seems reasonably convinced that he has no memory of day to day happenings and gives little evidence of recognising the books he has himself written as opposed to others which he thumbs through but does not read. He is said to prefer picture books to others and often hoards what is given to him underneath his pillow without doing anything with it.

Subject to confirmation by neurological opinion, the most likely diagnosis in this case is a chronic state of G.P.I. in which malaria or penicillin treatment were not given before it was too late to remedy progressive organic destruction of brain tissue. If this is the true diagnosis, it is highly unlikely that any form of treatment known in psychiatry today can remedy this defect. The C.S.F. is now reported as negative and therefore the progress of the disease is presumably arrested. But little hope can be held out that he will regain the faculties which he has lost in his long illness.

If expert neurological opinion is against the fact that this has been a long-standing syphilitic infection of the nervous system, the remaining possibility is that we are dealing with the chronic stages of a deteriorating schizophrenic illness. I do not personally think this to be the case, but the absence of organic neurological findings in India and the present negative C.S.F. is bound to raise the question in the minds of the psychiatrists treating him as to whether or not syphilis was the predominant cause of his illness, especially as no definite report of a positive C.S.F. is available - it is only hearsay.

If this latter alternative were the case, I still think the prognosis as regards treatment is far from good. Dr Davis has already given him six full cardiazol convulsions and several non-convulsive treatments. This did stir the patient to show some agitation, increase in washing, etc., but there is no evidence that it also revealed any islands of integrated personality to be present under his present facade.

The question of leucotomy has been raised. I would not expect it to have a ten percent chance of bringing about any material improvement. It might, on the contrary, increase his lethargy and confusion still further. Only if a further course

continued:

Figure 3 - Appendix 3 - Dr. William Sargant's Report, continued.

Muzrai Islam, continued:

of E.C.T. indicated that underneath his present apparent mental deterioration there was in fact some preservation of personality should it even be considered.

I am prepared to issue a further report when I have to hand the independent findings of other consultants who are going to examine this case. My own feeling at present is, however, that there is much to be said for allowing him to remain as he is and not be subjected to more somewhat violent treatments unless there is really hope that they will produce a material degree of improvement.

Yours sincerely,

William Sargent

(William Sargent, F.R.C.P.)
Physician i/c Dept. Psychological Medicine
St Thomas's Hospital.

Lt. Col. C.L. Pasricha, I.M.S.,
Medical Adviser to the High Commissioner for India,
India House,
Aldwych. W.C.2.

Figure 4 – Appendix 4 – Dr. William Sargent's Report (concluded).

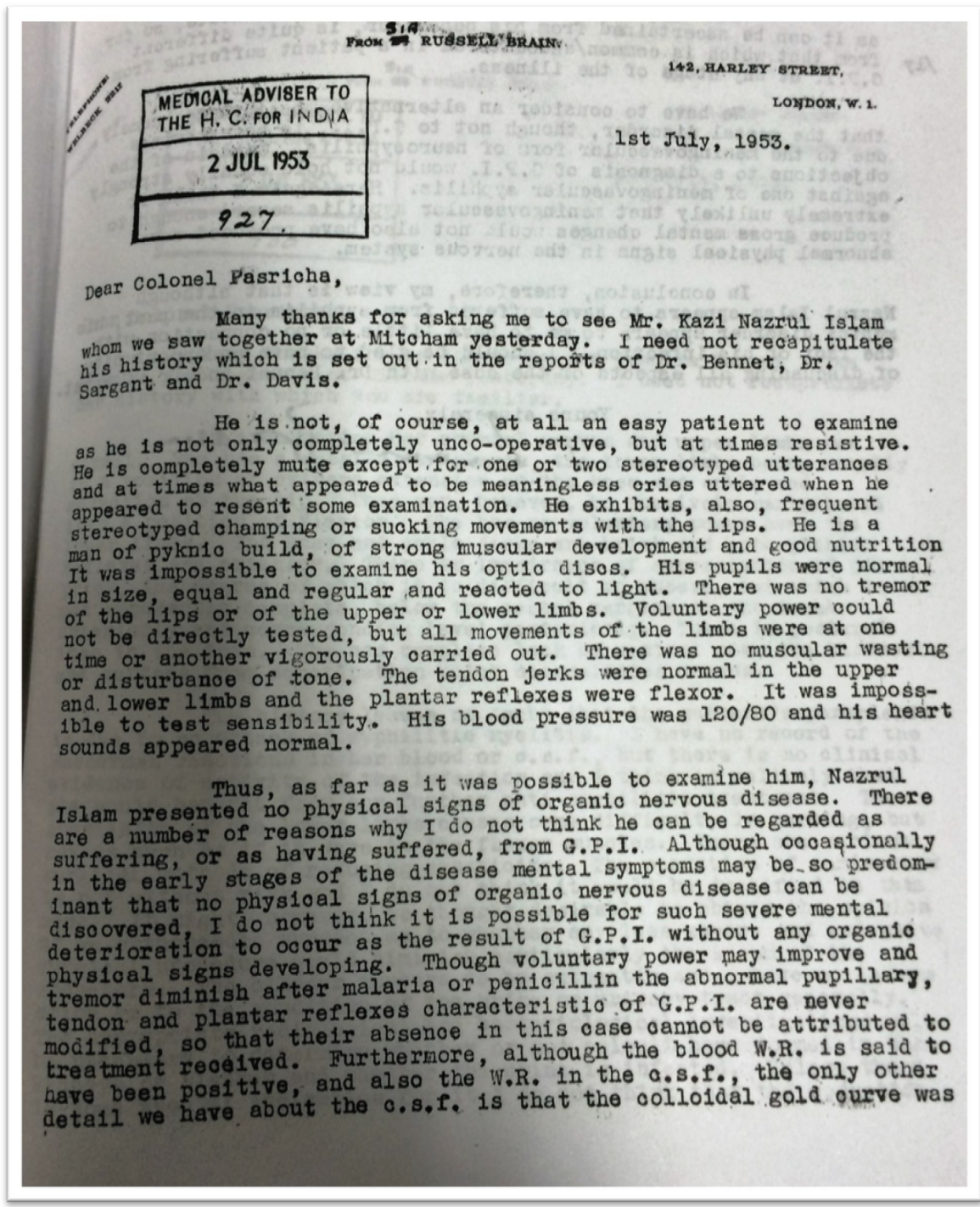


Figure 5 – Appendix 5 – Kazi Nazrul Islam's Medical Report addressed to Colonel Dr. Pasricha (Medical Adviser to High Commissioner for India). Report by – Dr. Russell Brain (1st July, 1953, London)

never abnormal. This also in my view would exclude G.P.I.

Finally, in my view the patient's mental state, so far as it can be ascertained from his behaviour, is quite different from that which is common/encountered in a patient suffering from G.P.I. at any stage of the illness.

We have to consider an alternative possibility, namely, that the mental disorder, though not to G.P.I., is nevertheless due to the meningovascular form of neurosyphilis. Certain of the objections to a diagnosis of G.P.I. would not hold equally strongly against one of meningovascular syphilis. Here again I think it extremely unlikely that meningovascular syphilis severe enough to produce gross mental changes would not also have produced some abnormal physical signs in the nervous system.

In conclusion, therefore, my view is that although Nazrul Islam appears to have suffered from syphilis in the past, his mental disorder appears to me to have little or no connection with the fact of his infection. I should be glad to have an opportunity of discussing all aspects of the case with Dr. Bennet and Dr. Sargent.

Yours sincerely,

Russell Brain

Figure 6 – Appendix 6 – Dr. Russell Brain's report (concluded).

12th August, 1953.

MEDICAL REPORT - CONFIDENTIAL.

We have each examined Mr. Quazi Islan and we have studied all the available medical records of his illness. Sir Russell Brain has also examined the patient and his report is before us. At a joint consultation we have discussed Mr. Islan's present condition and the possibilities of treatment. Our conclusions are as follows:-

Mr. Islan is in a condition of advanced organic dementia with loss of speech, agitation and uncontrolled personal habits. Atrophy of the brain is clearly shown on the X-ray photographs taken after Dr. Bull had made certain air-encephalographic tests.

We are confident that no form of medical or surgical treatment can restore Mr. Islan's intellectual power. This, we regret to say, is permanently lost. There is no likelihood that his creative power will return. Moreover, there is no indication at present for further treatment with penicillin, drug medication or shock therapy. We hold the opinion, however, that amelioration of the patient's agitation and disordered conduct, with improvement in his physical health, might be achieved by an operation. This might even render Mr. Islan more socially acceptable and he might appear in public from time to time, though playing a passive role.

The operation takes the form of a section of the infero-medial association fibres in the frontal lobe (McKissock's operation). A 'leucotomy' in the accepted sense of this term is not envisaged. A short stay in a well-equipped mental hospital would be necessary for operation.

We advise that this operation - not in itself a serious undertaking - should be performed. Without it, in our opinion, Mr. Islan's mental state will suffer further deterioration; there will be increased agitation with loss of bodily strength, and the expectation of life will be much reduced.

Dr. E. A. Bennet

E. A. Bennet
.....

Dr. James Bull

J. Bull
.....

Dr. Macdonald Critchley

Macdonald Critchley
.....

Mr. Wylie McKissock

W. McKissock
.....

Dr. William Sargent

William Sargent
.....

Figure 7 - Appendix 7 - Kazi Nazrul Islam Medical Report prepared by team of Doctors, London (12th August 1953)

I. SURGICAL UNIVERSITYCLINIC IN VIENNA

Chaimann: Prof. Dr. Leopold Schönbauer

Vienna, IX/71, Alserstraße 4 - Telephone No. A 28-5-30

Dated, Vienna the 12.10.1953

After going through the Letters and Recommendations relating to the Patient Mr. Quazi Islam, I do endorse the contents of the recommendations of the doctors Bennet, Bull, Chritchly, McKissock and Sargent.

Encephelography shows diffuse cerebral atrophy. Nothing could be detected as causes of the atrophy.

As proposed by Dr. Röttgen, a clarification of the aetiology could be possible by arteriography.

Due to the presence of vascularisation, it is not possible to cure him to the degree that the patient can function normally.

According to my opinion, the prognosis at this advanced stage of brain atrophy is very much negative.

Without seeing the patient it is impossible to give any decision to separate the fronto-thalamic channels.

As it seems from the papers, the patient seems to be neither aggressive nor in the state of anxiety, rather in satisfactory state. And that's why I believe that a separation of the fronto-thalamic channels is not needed.

(Signed) Illigible

Lect. Dr. Herbert Kraus

For the correctness of the Translation:



Kazi Mamun Rashid
8.9.96

Figure 8 – Appendix 8 - Kazi Nazrul Islam Medical Report. Report by – Dr. Herbert Kraus (12th October, 1953, Vienna)

DR. MARKWALDER
NEUROSURGERY
BERN

Dated, Bern the 28. Oct. 1953

DOCTOR'S REPORT

After going through the files of Mr. Kaz Naguel Islam, 55 years, my opinion is: the patient suffers from an advance stage of diffuse cerebral atrophy. There is no sign of any intracranial pressure, and there are severe changes in the personality of the patient. The patient is quiet, apathetic, totally disoriented, and speechless. The process of vascularisation of the brain was neglected for a long time and the patient did not undergo any medical treatment. With caroticoangiography, as advised by Prof. Röttgen, a treatment could possibly have positive effect in aetiological sense. But the therapy is not hopeful as such and no betterment of the situation can be achieved. The operation of fronto-thalamic channels, as proposed by some physicians, according to my opinion, cannot be taken into consideration due to the present condition of the patient.

(Signed) Illigible

For the correctness of the translation:



Kazi Mamun Rashid
8.9.96

Figure 9 – Appendix 9 - Kazi Nazrul Islam Medical Report. Report by – Dr. Markwalder (28th October, 1953, Bern)

UNIVERSITY-PSYCHIATRIC CLINIC
Prof. Dr. H.Hoff
Department of Neuro-Radiology / Tel. B 40-0-02
Vienna, IX, Lazarettgasse 14

Vienna, the 16.10.53

RESULTS

of the Patient : N.Islam

from:..... mark:.....

Ward: X-Rays submitted

Encephalography

The X-rays that are submitted, show that the ventricle system is filled up to a good extent.

The 3rd.ventricle is at the median-sagital position and shows clearly an enlargement. The situation of the basis cannot be clearly seen and thus no final assessment can be given.

Both the SV are clearly presented in different sectional views, they show a clear enlargement and without any shifting in the postion.

There was no evidence of filling of subarachnoideal space of the convexity but the basal cisterns are filled up and enlarged.

Diagnosis: Hyprocephalus int. as per sectional views.

Dr. Klausberger

For the ecorrectness of the Translation:



Kazi Mamun Rashid
8.9.96

Figure 10 – Appendix 10 - Kazi Nazrul Islam Medical Report. Report by – Dr. Klausberger (16th October, 1953, Vienna)

M E D I C A L R E P O R T

I have carefully examined the reports of Mr. Kazi Nazrul ISLAM and have come to the conclusion that I do not believe that the patient was suffering from general paresis. The beginning of the disease, the different gold-sol reaction, are not in favour of this diagnosis.

I think that the patient is suffering from a pseudo-paralytic state caused by a meningo-vascular-syphilis. The treatment was very poor. Malaria fever therapy which should have been applied even at the diagnosis of meningo-vascular-syphilis, was given too late, Penicillin treatment during the beginning of the disease was given in insufficient quantity.

At the present time there is a marked atrophy of the brain which can be recognized by the enormous hydrocephalus. The atrophy of the cortex itself could not be shown in the encephalographic study. The electroencephalogram is, according to my opinion, in the limit of the normal.

I can see no advantage in operating an already damaged brain, in which especially the frontal lobe has the severest signs of destruction. It will mean, according to my opinion, a further damage to be added to the already damaged brain.

I do not believe that a comparable situation is present as in hemiplegia spastica infantilis, where the removal of the damaged tissue improves the general condition. That is only possible when the other parts of the brain are normal, and so far we see in the case of Mr. ISLAM, there is a general damage of the brain present.

It is very difficult to decide, when or if, anything could be done for the mental health of Mr. ISLAM, without having seen the patient, but I am ready to give my opinion when the patient could stop even for a short time in Vienna on his way to India, if any measures at all could be taken for improving his mental health condition.

In the case of Mrs. ISLAM I feel, if the report is complete, that all means of examination have not been applied. There has been only one line in mind of the doctors and that is the syphilitic myelitis. This diagnosis is highly probable, but no chance has been given to a possible other diagnosis. I would suggest in the case of Mrs. ISLAM to bring her also to our clinic for further investigations.

For the investigations, both patients have to be admitted at our hospital, for which all facilities will be given when they come here.

Hans Hoff

Professor Dr. Hans Hoff
Director of the Clinic,
for Psychiatry and Neurology of
the University of Vienna.

Figure 11 – Appendix 11 - Kazi Nazrul Islam Medical Report. Report by – Dr. Hans Hoff (17th October, 1953, Vienna)

Major Anthologies of Prose & Poetic Writings by Kazi Nazrul

Islam

1. Byathar Dan (Offering of Pain), short stories, 1922.
2. Agni Bina (The Fiery Lute), poems, 1922.
3. Yuga Bani (The Message of the Age), essays, 1926 Proscribed in 1922.
4. Dolan Champa (name of a faintly fragrant monsoon flower), poems and songs, 1923.
5. "Rajbondir Jabanbandi". (Deposition of a Political Prisoner), an address, 1923.
6. Bisher Banshi (The Poison Flute), poems and songs, 1924.
7. Bhangar Gan (The Song of Destruction), songs and poems, 1924 Proscribed in 1924.
8. Rikter Bedan (The Sorrows of the Destitute), short stories, 1925.
9. Chhayanat (The Raga of Chhyanatt), poems and songs, 1925.
10. Chittanama (On C.R. Das), poems and songs, 1925.
11. Samyabadi (Egalitarian), poems, 1925.
12. Puber Hawa (The Eastern Wind), poems and songs, 1926.
13. Jhinge Phul (The Cucurbitaccus Flower), essays, 1926.
14. Durdiner Jatri (The Traveller through Rough Times), essays, 1926.
15. Sharbahara (The Proletariat), poems and songs, 1926.
16. Rudra Mangal (The Violent Good), essays, 1927.
17. Phanimanasa (The Cactus), poems, 1927.
18. Sindhu Hindol (The Undulation of The Sea), poems and songs, 1927.
19. Bandhan Hara (Free from Bondage), Novel, 1927.
20. Sanchita (Collected Poems), 1925.
21. Bulbul (The Nightingale), songs, 1928.
22. Jhinjir (Chain), poems and songs, 1928.
23. Chakrabak (The Flamingo), poems, 1929.
24. Sandhya (The Evening), songs, 1929.
25. Chokher Chatak (Thirsty for Sight), songs, 1929.
26. Mrityukshuda (Hunger for Death), novel, 1930.
27. Rubaiyat-e-Hafiz (Rubaiyat-e-Hafiz), translation, 1930.
28. Nazrul Geetika, (collected Nazrul Songs), 1930.

29. Jhilmili (Window Shutters), plays, 1930.
30. Prayala Shikha (The Doomsday Flame), poems and songs, 1930, proscribed in 1930.
31. Kuhelika (Mystery), novel, 1931.
32. Nazrul Swaralipi (The Notation for Nazrul Songs), 1931.
33. Chandrabindu (Nasal Mark), songs, 1931.
34. Shiulimala (Garland of Shiuli flowers), stories, 1931.
35. Aleya (Mirage), song drama, 1931.
36. Sursaki (The Serving Maid of Melodies), songs, 1932.
37. Banageeti (Songs of Wilderness), 1931.
38. Zulfiquar (The Sword of Ali), songs, 1931.
39. Putuler Biye (Doll's Marriage), Children's play, 1932.
40. Satbhai Champa (The Seven Brothers of Champa), juvenile Poems, 1933.
41. Gul Baghicha (Flower Garden), songs, 1933.
42. Kabye Ampara (Verse Translation of the Ampara), 1933.
43. Geeti Satadal (One Hundred Songs), 1934.
44. Surmukur (Notations), 1934.
45. Ganer Mala (Garland of Songs), 1934.
46. Maktab Sahitya (A Text Book for Maktab), 1935.
47. Nirjhar (Fountain), poems, 1939.
48. Natun Chand (The New Moon), poems, 1939.
49. Swaralipi (Notations), 1949.
50. Marubhashakar (The Sun of the Desert), poems, 1951.
51. Bulbul Dwitya Bhag (Bulbul, Part Two), sings, 1952.
52. Sanchayan (Collected Poems), 1955.
53. Shesh Saogat (The Last Offerings), poems and songs, 1958.
54. Rubiyat of Omar Khyaam, translation, 1958.
55. Madhumala (Garland of Honeysuckle), a musical play, 1960.
56. Dhumketu (The Comet), essays, 1961.
57. Jahr (Storm), juvenile poems and play, 1961.
58. Pile patka putuler biye (Doll's marriage), Juvenile poems and play, 1964.
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- e) Langol (1925)
- f) Ganobani (1926)
- g) Kallol (1923 – 1941)
- h) Shonibarar Chithi (1924 – 1941)
- i) Masik Mohammodi (1927 – 1928)
- j) Saogat (1918 - 1930)
- k) Probasi (1920 – 1940)
- l) The Daily Star (1991 – 2013)
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HMV Music (Saregama Dum Dum factory) - L.P. Record – HMV ECSD 2555

EMI Cassette no. HTCS 028 2641 Stereo

1.5 Digital Source (Audio) –

Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra (<http://www.betar.org.bd/>)

First and second phase of song transmission (March 26 till May 25 1971) from Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. Third phase of song transmission (May 25, 1971 till January 2, 1972)

Kahkashan – (<http://www.youtube.com>)

Kahkashan – Produced by Ali Sardar Jafri, Network broadcast by – Doordarshan (DD National), Year – 1990-91. Kahkashan is an Indian television series about six great masters of modern Urdu and Islamic poetry: Hasrat Mohani, Jigar Moradabadi, Josh Malihabadi, Majaz Lucknawi, Firaq Gorakhpuri, and Makhdoom Mohiuddin. The serial was researched and scripted by Ali Sardar Jafri and directed by Jalal Agha. The series was also shown on TV Asia channel USA in 2006.

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Sumangala Damodaran, (Associate Professor, School of Culture and Creative Expressions, Ambedkar University Delhi)

Urmimala Sarkar, (Assistant Professor, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University)

Sangeeta Haldar (Principal, Shiarsol Raj High School, Raniganj, West Bengal)

Subol Ghosh, Bashir Ahmed and Pratim Chatterjee (Officer in Charge, Nazrul Mancha, Kolkata, Burdwan, Asansol, respectively)

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